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## The Experiential Journey of Teacher-Scholars: “If you’re not a teacher, you just don’t get it”

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The Experiential Journey of Teacher-Scholars: “If you’re not a teacher, you just don’t get it”

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Curriculum and Instruction

by

Ashleigh L. Pelafigue

B.S. University of New Orleans, 2008  
M.Ed. University of New Orleans, 2012

May, 2018

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## **Abstract**

The Center of Graduate Schools (2015) published a report detailing applications, enrollment, and trends in graduate schools across the nation showing that approximately one third of all first-time graduate school applicants in master's degree programs utilizing the GRE assessment identify their career path in either business or teacher education. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursued graduate studies to earn a master's degree in education and to understand how adult learning provided opportunities for personal growth and the attainment of professional goals. Individual interviews and two focus groups were conducted to uncover the essence of experiences across participant stories. Seven themes emerged from the data: 1) Teacher-scholars' reasons for returning to higher education varied based on their personal and professional needs, 2) The teacher-scholar experience elicits a vast array of emotions, challenges, and successes, 3) Teacher-scholars were self-driven to start their programs however intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provided encouragement for continued desire for success, 4) Teacher-scholars' support systems were integral to their success in their master's programs, 5) Teacher-scholars were reflective about their teaching and learning and used reflection as a tool to improve their professional capabilities, 6) Teacher-scholars used concrete learning experiences to bring their learning into their classrooms and professional lives, and 7) Teacher-scholars' educational journeys provided opportunities for here-and-now learning as well as increased marketability for a future in the field of education. Additionally, a revision to David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015) was presented. Participant data highlighted collaboration as a necessary component to teacher-scholar success yet it was not addressed in Kolb's original model. Results from this study can be used to inform teacher education programs as well as teacher-scholars on the expectations, experiences, and perceptions of teachers who concurrently pursued higher education.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, andragogy, teachers, higher education, motivation, support, reflection, collaboration, phenomenological

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

For teachers, continued growth, development, and education, in both formal and informal settings, are integral parts of becoming a reflective practitioner. Career advancement and other personal goals and professional growth drive teachers to return to graduate school. Their pursuit of advanced degree opportunities brings new challenges and experiences. Regardless of the reason why teachers choose to return to school, their learning is driven by individual experiences during this time of educational growth. This study focuses on the experiences, challenges, motivations, and outcomes of teachers who choose to further their education while remaining in the classroom.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursue graduate studies and to understand how adult learning provides opportunities for personal growth and the attainment of professional goals. While higher education is not the only way a teacher can expand professional knowledge, it offers teachers additional opportunities to promote continued learning and advanced understanding of current educational needs and trends in a structured, yet self-directed environment. This study examines the educators' experiences while serving in a dual capacity as both classroom teacher and higher-learning student. Pursuing a graduate degree extends the basic knowledge of educators thus helping the educator to be better prepared with the knowledge and understanding of educational practices that may have positive impacts in attaining personal and professional goals.

## **Personal Reflection: The Road to Higher Education**

For as long as I remember I have wanted to teach. Teaching has been a part of my life since I was old enough to hold a piece of chalk and talk to anyone that would listen. Perhaps this was the start of my journey in lifelong learning. When I completed my undergraduate studies, I took a job at a high-poverty, low-performing school. Early on in my career I realized that although I felt prepared to teach content: grammar rules, comprehension strategies, mathematic problem solving, I felt greatly unprepared to teach a student how to actually decode text to read. I can recall trying different strategies and tips I had received from veteran teachers and still I felt as if I was doing a disservice to my students. As their teacher, I was supposed to have been able to help them. I should have been able to teach my students to decode. I needed to connect phonemic awareness and phonics in such a way that my students grasped letters, sounds, chunking, and all the basic literacy skills they needed to become readers. Among the countless adversities new teachers face, this was my biggest challenge. I struggled to teach my students how to sift through text on a page. This alone would greatly impact academic success in all aspects of their education.

I examined my own teaching practices so that I could teach my children to be readers. Although I attended many professional development opportunities offered by my school district, I still felt unprepared to teach my most at-risk students to read and excel. Professional development opportunities provided for teachers were useful for giving ideas and strategies to try but implementing them in the classroom with fidelity was a struggle as we were limited to adding anything in our daily curriculum. I had very little autonomy in how to facilitate small reading groups and whole group teaching was scripted down to the minute. My school administration required all teachers to follow a specific reading program. We were expected to

do and say everything the teacher's manual outlined. Lesson plans were developed straight from the manual and we were forced to follow the pacing as it was designed by the publishing company. After teaching for just one year, I enrolled in a master's degree program focusing on literacy acquisition and language instruction in hopes to learn more fluid ways to impart decoding and early literacy skills into structured, pre-planned curriculum.

Throughout my master's degree program, I learned about myself as a learner as I worked to become a better teacher for my students. I was highly motivated to excel in the program. This was the first time I was able to see myself not only as the student but also as the teacher. My students' challenges pushed me to improve myself. I had to learn to go beyond the planned curriculum that had been provided to me. My students were severely lacking in phonemic awareness and phonics strategies; letters and sounds had no meaning therefore students were unable to decode text and create words and sentences. As a new teacher, I was afraid to deviate from the guide and while I realized that gaps in learning were my students' biggest problems I was not sure how to move forward. The fear of job security was real and the thought of putting down the manual and backtracking to skills students should have learned in kindergarten and first grade caused me anxiety. I knew it was what my students needed but I was fearful of the feedback I would receive if someone realized that I had essentially ignored the direction of administration and focused more on what my students had to know in order to be successful.

During my master's program, I was able to learn, implement and re-evaluate my own learning and my classroom instruction. I gained confidence to stand up for what I knew my students had to know. I worked with veteran teachers, school administrators, and professors that supported my professional thinking and reminded me of why I entered the classroom in the first place. It was not to read from a textbook but rather to make a difference in the lives of my



students. Although I already knew these things, I was scared. I was a December graduate taking on a class that had a certified teacher for only part of the first semester and countless substitutes before I arrived.

My master's degree program was my first experience with real hands-on learning. I could easily learn a new strategy then immediately implement it in my classroom and evaluate how it helped my students. This was very different than my undergraduate experience as I no longer had to wait until a field experience day or teach a family member's child. Using these strategies immediately in my classroom opened my eyes to literacy skills that I had once learned yet tucked away in the long-forgotten part of my brain. Now it was practical knowledge and as a result of these changes in teaching practice, I saw changes in my students. My students were showing initiative in classroom reading tasks; we were building a safe community where it was clear that we all (myself included) were learning together. It became a place where students were moving towards being unafraid of mistakes and willing to help each other figure things out. We talked about decoding text and being a text detective by seeking out the little clues that worked together to solve the mystery. We created code charts and songs and skits so that students could access their knowledge through whatever means necessary to be successful. My students were developing their reading skills. They were decoding text of simple and complex levels, gaining reading fluency and confidence, and being able to use the comprehension strategies to retell and interpret the meanings of literature. We were making progress – the students in their endeavors to become strong readers, and I was using first-hand experiences and my own learning to guide instruction each day.

As I continued my higher education I reflected upon my experiences both as a teacher and an adult learner. Although I was unaware at the time, this was the beginning of my interest in

understanding adult learners and my road to this research. My personal journey to higher education did not end with the completion of my master's degree. After much consideration and discussion with those who have had great influence on my educational endeavors, I decided to return to the university once more to pursue a doctoral degree. At the on-set of coursework I had very little direction as to where I was going with my doctoral degree. My goal throughout my experiences with higher education has always been to become a better teacher. I wondered about others who are in the same situation as I was: teaching full time and tackling a full-time university course load. What are their experiences like? How do they manage time constraints and family obligations? Why do they pursue continuing education? These questions led me to this phenomenological study which highlights the experiences teachers face while teaching and concurrently pursuing higher education.

### **Statement of the problem**

In the fall of 2015, the Center of Graduate Schools published a report detailing applications, enrollment and trends, in graduate schools across the nation as a result of the findings determined by the CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees (Okahana, Feaster, & Allum, 2016). In this report, data shows that approximately one third of all first-time graduate school applicants in master's degree programs that utilize the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) assessment for admission, identify their career path in either business or teacher education. The report continues to discuss that although over 66,000 adult learners apply to master's programs focusing on education, the number of applicants is decreasing and this is on trend with the data that was collected over the preceding five years. However, in the *Condition of Education* (McFarland et al., 2017), a mandated report presented yearly to Congress, the National Center for Education Statistics states that "between 2015 and 2026, post baccalaureate

enrollment overall is projected to increase by 12 percent” (p. 122) however no specific determination has been made on teacher education. Over the last two decades, pursuing advanced degrees within the education field is flourishing yet research specific to teacher education is scarce.

## **Significance**

Over the past 12 years there has been little research examining students who pursue education and career concurrently. In a 2010 study, O’Connor and Cordova examined working adult students in business. They stated their purpose as being “to describe the learning experiences of adult part-time master’s students, who are rarely the focus of research” (p. 1). Their phenomenological investigation describes learning experiences, needs, and professional gains and perception of value in the degree from students in the program. The findings from my pilot study in 2015 were consistent with the findings of O’Connor and Cordova (2010) recognizing that teachers who pursue advanced degrees are often challenged with obligations and stressors yet still claim to be motivated, self-directed learners who seek advancement in both personal and professional aspects of their lives for various reasons.

This study utilized similar methods to examine the experiences of teachers who attend graduate school concurrent with their careers. However, unlike the O’Connor and Cordova (2010) study, the current study focused specifically on teachers who are working in their field of study rather than those in varying fields, some unrelated, to the degree they are pursuing. The findings contribute to the literature supporting teachers, career advancement, and how pursuing graduate studies impacts personal life and professional decision- making. The contributions from this study are available to inform teacher practice, provide information to university program

developers on student expectations, and create a broad understanding of experiences to potential students exploring higher education.

### **Research Question**

This study investigated the experiences of classroom teachers who continued their education in pursuit of a master's degrees while maintaining their teaching position. This will enable colleagues and researchers to better understand how adult learning experiences provide opportunities for personal growth and the attainment of professional goals. The following question was the focus of the study and guided the research:

*What are the personal and professional experiences of classroom teachers who have concurrently pursued a master's degree in education?*

In order to understand continuing education for classroom teachers in this context, I wanted to know more about their personal relationship with learning as well. Through interviews and focus group discussions, participants shared their lived experiences, personal thoughts and feelings. Participant stories aid scholars, university faculty, and prospective students in better understanding the impact that concurrent teaching and learning can have on professionals. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, 2013) served as a catalyst to discuss reflective practice from experiences in the university classroom and how those experiences influenced K-12 teacher practices. The findings from this study contribute to the available research on graduate schools and continuing education for prospective students and current teachers and served as a reflective opportunity for participants to recount their experiences and share with teacher-scholars who may embark on the same or a similar journey.

## **Pilot Study**

In the summer of 2015, I conducted a pilot study to determine how continuing education affected teacher motivation in the classroom as well as how the lived experiences of teachers differed depending on professional responsibilities and career paths in order to understand how teaching and learning facilitated lifelong learning for educators. Initially, convenience sampling through social media was used to locate teachers who met the study criteria: a minimum of three years of classroom teaching experience, currently held a degree beyond initial teacher certification, maintained full-time teaching requirements while attending graduate school. Seven teachers responded but only four classroom teachers met the necessary qualifications of the study and committed to participating. One teacher, midway through the research process, discontinued participation due to unforeseen circumstances.

Using narrative inquiry to guide the story-telling nature of experiences, a series of three interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Open and axial coding were used for data analysis. Collective themes emerged from the analysis of all interview transcriptions. Nine subthemes surfaced as being important to participants and vital to their experiences as adult learners: developing improved professional qualities, mentoring and the importance of support systems, balancing personal and professional lives, experiences as motivation for success, expressing self-determination, self-realization of emotional challenges, developing a teaching style, advancing in the workplace, and being part of a professional community. These subthemes were then organized into snapshots of experiences that related to three overarching themes: motivation to be a better student and teacher, supportive systems and professional communities, and reaching for success for the future. Narrative descriptions and direct quotes told the story of

why some teachers return to the collegiate classroom and how those reasons each play a role in their ultimate success as professionals.

The pilot study was greatly limited due to time constraints, a population that lacked diversity, research questions that lacked depth and interview design that was too cumbersome to complete in a short period of time. While results of the pilot study were consistent with results of similar research (Kelaheer-Young & Carver, 2013; O'Connor & Cordova, 2010), it was clear that the pilot study lacked depth in understanding the essence behind the experiences. I was left to question how adult learners cope with time constraints, additional pressures, and missed opportunities in their personal lives. I also was unable to examine how motivation and support systems aid in the professional growth of teachers. Teachers discussed how different motivations encouraged them with completing their degree programs however interview sessions did not follow a path to guide questioning in relation to professional growth and career advancement. This led me to wonder how the findings of the study may have differed if experience played a more prominent role in the study development. During the interview sessions, participants clearly expressed their motivations however their discussion of experiences was limited.

In this study, I sought to understand the experience of teachers who continue their education while teaching and how that experience provides opportunities for growth in both the personal and professional aspects of their lives. I aimed to uncover what adult learners gain from higher education, what experiences mean to teachers actively engaging in higher education, and what adult learners do to move forward in their lives and careers as a result of their learning experiences. The experiences of participants help to inform preservice teachers, practicing teachers, and those considering higher education of the impact of higher education on classroom teachers. The findings of this add to the growing research in adult education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

A strong theoretical background was necessary to support this continued research in adult education. While the experiences of teachers cannot be quantified by a number or statistical analysis, the stories, the day-to-day life and the successes and setbacks are the driving forces behind how educators reflect on their teaching practices and grow as professionals. This study was grounded in both andragogy and the Experiential Learning Theory as these theories provided insight into how adult learners gain new knowledge.

Andragogy, as introduced to readers in the United States by Knowles in the 1960s, is said to have originated as early 1833 by a German educator, Alexander Kapp. The term, used internationally, differentiates the period of learning following pedagogy, the practice of educating children, and can refer to “any intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 60).

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2008) echoes the foundational works of Lewin and Dewey and the learning cycle driven by action/reflection and experience/abstraction. Experience is enhanced by the self-reflection of events that impact learning and teaching. Together these two theories support this research study in providing a basic understanding of the adult learner experience.

Andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2008) supports why adult learners, who are also teachers, may relate and reflect in certain ways to experiences and pursue future endeavors as a result of their motivation and self-directed learning. In the next section, the theory of andragogy is defined and assumptions of adult learners are identified to support how adult learners design and interpret their own learning. The discussion

continues with the experiential learning theory and how experiences in all aspects of teachers' lives contribute to their education.

## **Andragogy**

Andragogy, as defined by Knowles (1980), is “the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43.) Extensive exploration in adult learning has led numerous researchers (Chan, 2010; Harris, 2003; Moore, 2010; Peterson & Ray, 2013; Taylor & Kroth, 2009) to consult the works of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), and later works from Forrest and Peterson (2006) and Merriam, Ceffarella, and Baumgartner (2007). Although andragogy is at home in the field of education, its popularity is growing across a variety of fields in higher education. In a research article, Chan (2010) reported that the andragogical approach has been adopted in multiple disciplines such as education (Bolton, 2006), medicine (Bedi, 2004), criminal justice (Birzer, 2004) and management (Forrest & Peterson, 2006).

These researchers agreed that Knowles' andragogical assumptions are directly associated with the process of learning as an adult. A summary of these assumptions is as follows:

1. *The need to know.* Before committing to learn something new, adults must understand why it is necessary.
2. *The learner's self-concept.* Adults develop a self-concept for their own decision-making. This self-concept creates potential problems. Adults, who are typically self-directed learners, become leery of tasks in which others could be seen as imposing beliefs or instruction as they want to be seen as being able to be self-directed in their learning. Challenges arise when an adult learner becomes increasingly resistant and



resorts to conditioned dependent learning from childhood rather than being a motivated, independent learner.

3. *The role of the learners' experience.* The quality and quantity of life experiences impacts the way an adult learner obtains information.
4. *Readiness to learn.* Adults are conditioned to learn certain skills when they are ready to learn them. If the situation and skill is not applicable to their phase of life then the learning may not be as meaningful and useful as it would be if the situation required them to be ready.
5. *Orientation to learning.* Adult learning is life-centered rather than subject-centered as is typical in the elementary classroom. Adults are motivated in various ways to learn what they should to know to excel in certain tasks or to handle challenges in various aspects of life. Context and necessity in life provide motivation to build on skills and knowledge in order to develop understanding, values, skills and attitudes more effectively.
6. *Motivation.* As reported by Tough (1971, 1979), adults are motivated to keep growing and developing, but motivation is frequently blocked by different barriers. Adult learners respond to various types of motivations: extrinsic such as career advancement and higher pay and intrinsic such as self-satisfaction, quality of life. These motivators and personal self-esteem have the biggest impact on success for adult learners.

(Knowles, 1990, pp. 57-63; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, pp. 64-69)

Although the andragogical model is geared towards the education of adults, it is not to say that pedagogy is unnecessary in situations relating to adults and continuing education. As

Knowles et al., (1998) discusses, a distinction can be made between the two educational models: pedagogy and andragogy. Pedagogical assumptions show full teacher responsibility in making instructional decisions for student learning including how to present information, how to assess information and how to determine if information has been learned to a teacher-reported degree of mastery. This leaves the learner in a dependent role, through teacher-directed learning, and leaves the learner's role as submissive to following the teacher's directions.

The pedagogical assumptions are comprised of teacher-directed learning with the student developing a dependent personality as based on the natural maturation of children and adults. This supports the release of dependency shifting from pedagogy to andragogy at a pace that supports the learners' needs. As he argues however, "the culture does not nurture the development of the abilities required for self-direction, while the need to be increasingly self-directing continues to develop organically" (Knowles, 1990, p. 55).

Knowles' body of research includes the learning trends prior to the implementation of contemporary teacher evaluations across the nation. New expectations for teachers include a push to give the students a more facilitative role in their education, thus marrying the processes of andragogy and pedagogy to create an educational plan in which students take on greater responsibility for their own learning. With this shift in accountability, Knowles' assumptions, although still applicable for some experiences, could stand to be revised or revisited given the growing number of states in the United States that are working towards success through increased academic rigor and student-led classrooms being large portions teacher accountability evaluations. The shift from pedagogy to andragogy should no more be defined by a delineation of children to adults but rather by the need for support – from more support at the pedagogical

level to the release of control and increase of student responsibility approaching the andragogical level.

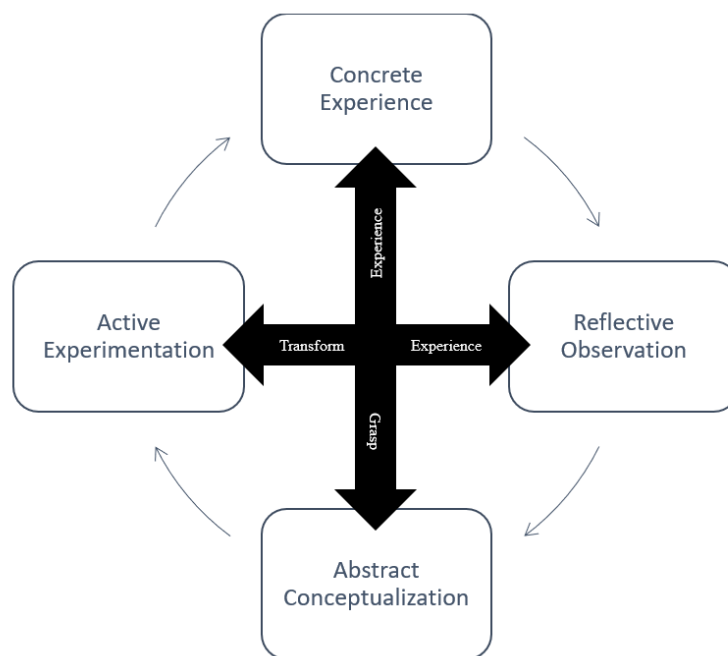
The process of adult learning is a key element to this research as adult learners interpret experiences and learning opportunities in different ways. By examining experiences through the assumptions of the andragogic model, the interpretation of participant experiences were grounded in adult learning as opposed to learning in a general sense.

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

For learners of all ages, gaining new knowledge is not limited to a classroom, textbook or lecture. Learning takes shape from experiences, formal and informal, throughout a person's life and how the experiences are perceived enhance learning opportunities. Knowles et al. (1998) confirmed that a trending topic in adult education, even two decades ago, was that learners wanted to have control of their learning: "The idea is that better outcomes result when the learner retains control throughout the learning phases" (p. 123). This sense of control is reflective of how learners adapt and adopt what they have learned from experiences in their journey. For teachers this may have taken place in a classroom, field work or teaching, or some place unrelated to education altogether.

Experiential Learning Theory is defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2008, Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). Experiential Learning Theory draws upon the research of twentieth century scholars who used experiences as derivatives for their studies in human development. Kolb and Kolb cite numerous scholars that had great impact on their research in Experiential Learning Theory including John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and more (Kolb & Kolb, 2008).

Experiential Learning Theory enhances what is learned through the understanding and transformation of actions and ideas. Through this experience, the learner cycles through a process of knowledge construction. Experiential Learning Theory refers to four modes of learning that are equally responsive to the cognitive demands of a given experience. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, as shown in Figure 1, is a cycle in which the learner participates in a “new experience of situation or a reinterpretation of existing experience” (McLeod, 2017). Kolb states, “This process is portrayed as an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner “touches all bases” – experiencing, reflecting, thinking , and acting – in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned” (Kolb & Kolb, 2008).



**Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (updated 2015)<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> KOLB, DAVID A., EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: EXPERIENCE AS THE SOURCE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT, 2<sup>nd</sup>, ©2015. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.

Kolb suggests that there are four steps in the experiential learning cycle:

1. *Concrete experience* – involvement in new here-and-now experiences.
2. *Observations and reflection* – reflection on and observation of the learner's experiences from many perspectives.
3. *Formation of abstract concepts and generalization* – creation of concepts that integrate the learner's observations into logically sound theories.
4. *Testing implications of new concepts in new situations* – usage of theories to make decisions and solve problems.

The four steps also create a framework for designing learning experiences for adults (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 148). In similar research, Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2002) discuss using various learning strategies and abilities during strategic learning events and experiences:

In grasping experience, some of us perceive new information through experiencing the concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world, relying on our senses and immersing ourselves in concrete reality. Others tend to perceive, grasp, or take hold of new information through symbolic representation or abstract conceptualizations, thinking about, analyzing, or systematically planning, rather than using sensation as a guide. Similarly, in transforming or processing experience some of us tend to carefully watch others who are involved in the experience and reflect on what happens, while others choose to jump right in and start doing things. (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 52)

In addition to experiences of active involvement with learning, conversation and discussion also play vital roles developing as a learner. Kolb, Baker, and Jensen (2002) discuss the implications of conversation as it relates to experiential learning theory: "Learners move

through the cycle of experiencing, reflecting, abstracting, and acting as they construct meaning from their experiences in conversation” (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 52). By understanding how these different learning and teaching styles impact the meaning behind experiences, researchers and learners alike can conclude that Kolb’s model is not simply a four-stage program for learning but a cycle that can be started and cycled through at any of the four stages. These four stages of learning are integral in understanding how the learner experience enhances concurrent teachers classroom instruction on a daily basis.

**The Intersection of Andragogy and Experiential Learning Theory.** Experiential learning and andragogy serve as the foundation for an interactive yet reflective higher education experience. For this reason, these theories serve jointly as the theoretical framework for this research study. Adult learning and learning through experiences help to develop a new understanding of known skills, to improve job performance, and to aid learners in attaining personal goals and overcome challenges. This study, grounded in understanding adult learners and their experience, discusses how various personal, educational, and professional decisions impacted how teachers adapted their lives during the time they spent as teacher and student.

### **Overview of Methodology**

In this phenomenological study, I describe the lived experiences of participants and identify the commonalities and challenges that participants encountered while concurrently teaching and pursuing their master’s degree. To do so I used purposeful criterion sampling (Cresswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to locate participants who all had similar experiences: being a classroom teacher and pursuing a master’s degree concurrently. By utilizing criterion-based sampling, participants must have met specific qualifications in order to be considered for the study.

The aim of the study was to attain at least ten diverse participants to showcase the experiences and commonalities among teacher-scholars. Through a collection of demographic data, semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009, p. 114) and focus group discussions, I examined participant experiences and identified key elements in the learning and teaching processes to discover diversities and common themes. After identifying key data points, analyzing coded statements, and highlighting emergent themes, I share the findings as they relate to the experiences of dual teaching and learning and how these themes directly relate to the individual participants.

### **Summary**

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the purpose, direction and methodology of the current research study. While existing research (Kelaher-Young & Carver, 2013; O'Connor & Cordova, 2010) shows that experiences in higher education directly impact adult learners, little research has been conducted specifically targeting teacher experiences in higher education or those who pursue advanced degrees while maintaining a full-time teaching position. Through analysis of experiences of practicing teachers and their educational journeys, this study adds to the growing research base in adult learning and higher education. The following chapter will explore relevant literature on adult learners and how preparation, motivation, and support play vital roles in teacher-scholar success.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

The life of a teacher is a balancing act between personal goals and professional expectations. In this review of literature, I explore learners and learning, motivation, and support for students in higher education. A model for design is discussed and highlights significant topics related to professionals in the career world who return to higher education while maintaining their professional roles. Research related to the learner and learning, motivation, and support systems, are instrumental in understanding how experiences can influence careers and lives. This review also explores current research surrounding adults who pursue higher education in other fields and illustrates how continued research is necessary in the areas of teacher education and higher educational attainment for practicing teachers.

#### **Model for Design**

In O'Connor and Cordova's 2010 study, researchers examined working adult learners in Business Education programs and explored how their experiences impacted their lives, both personally and professionally. This study served as a model for my current study conducted in the field of teacher education, with a similar population of teachers concurrently engaging in higher education. Together, the two studies highlight the two most popular master's degree areas of concentration of applicants over the last 12 years.

Researchers analyzed the phenomenon "the overall experience of working full-time and studying part-time" (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010). O'Connor and Cordova questioned how adult learners managed their day-to-day lives while studying as well as how they adapted and adopted learning to enhance their personal growth and professional endeavors. The study sheds light on



the experience of simultaneously maintaining a job while attending graduate in the field of Business Education.

A phenomenological approach was used to capture the experiences of working full-time and studying part-time. Six graduate students, selected from a pool of applicants in a business education/certification program, participated in in-depth interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes. Interview data was analyzed through multiple approaches. Researchers manually coded and grouped significant statements in the transcribed data. They then used electronic analysis software to sort and network coded statements. Researchers then used their manual coding and electronic coding to organize data into themes.

Researchers discovered nine central themes and related each to a journey the participants took. The first identified theme involved career development and reasons for beginning a graduate degree. For most participants, future development in their career field was a determining factor in their decision-making process. Theme two hinged on the motivation to complete the degree program – the ability “to do it” (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010, p. 363). All participants were confident in their ultimate success although “several expressed math, writing, or test-taking phobias” (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010, p. 363). Researchers concluded from their analysis that success in completing the degree was not as much about academic ability but about willpower and motivation. Researchers cited that all participants reported that in order to be successful, they needed support from their friends and family.

Continuing the discussion of support, theme three was related to the help that participants receive from their support systems. Participants in relationships reported finding it easier to balance expectations in all aspects of their journey while single participants reported having a more challenging time navigating their success. Researchers shared that although the students’

situations and support systems were different, all participants coped and were able to manage their priorities.

Themes four and five described challenges that the participants faced: seeking balance in their lives and having limited support in their career field. Managing schedules, staying focused on tasks at hand, and being present in life's situations proved to be challenging for participants in this study. Lack of support in their work places caused participants to feel that "their peers simply dismissed the value of their graduate work and other times their supervisors downplayed the value of their studying" (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010, p. 363). While some participants struggled with financial burdens of continuing education, other participants were receiving tuition assistance from their employers. Participants, from both financial situations, were feeling that pressures of balancing life, career, finances, and education added to their stress and were being devalued by their workplaces as a result of their continuing education. Participants also reported that although their educational experience was constant, their lives and jobs were ever changing. Through the course of the study, researchers reported that all participants either changed jobs or took on a new job during their course of continuing education. Not surprisingly, those with the highest satisfaction in their jobs were those who were able to immediately apply their learning to their day-to-day workplace. Others were frustrated when not able to do so. Theme six again referred to support and motivation and was centered around active learning. When participants felt supported and were treated as adults, they experienced increased motivation and drive for learning. Participants stated that they appreciated opportunities to work in collaboration with others outside of the classroom. While these group experiences posed challenges for some participants in the areas of time management and balancing school, career, and life, the participants welcomed the learning opportunities they gained from the experiences.

Continuing with the researcher's metaphor of being on a journey, theme seven relates to the participants encountering others along the way and seeking to be part of the bigger community. Students reported that because of their university-defined course plan, challenging schedules, and other obligations, they were not able to interact socially or participate in organized events that would have connected them with others in the academic community. There also was not an extensive outreach of support at the university level for graduate students and none of the participants utilized campus amenities or recreational facilities. Themes eight and nine sum up the study by analyzing the future career options and impact of the concurrent enrollment while maintaining a job.

At the conclusion of the study, participants were still highly confident in their abilities – this time to seek career growth as a result of their experiences, so much in fact, that participants reported being “frustrated by having too many options... having succeeded in a graduate program made them even more marketable” (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010, p. 366). One participant expressed frustration with having too many options as a result of completing the degree program; opportunities to travel for internships and career advancement were welcome however the participant expressed that ultimately attaining a career utilizing his talents was the main goal. Many of the participants were already considering continuing their education towards a higher degree in order to continue their educational growth and career potential. It was evident in the study that the participants shared a high level of academic motivation which propelled them to their own successes. Continuing education provided new opportunities, new developments of self and self-worth, and solidified the importance of friends and family during a journey such as this.

Cordova and O'Connor's research in business education served as a model for my research focusing on teachers returning to seek advanced degrees in teacher education; however, my research examines learning through the different experiences of each of the participants. While researchers did not directly address experiential learning in their research methods, their research identified the importance of varied experiences which promote successful completion of a degree in the field of business education. The need identified by O'Connor and Cordova (2010) for varied experiences in adult education supports continued research into the actual experiences of adult learners and exploration of how continued education and life experience play vital roles in developing professionals. My research study focused heavily on the experiences of teachers and how reflection on those opportunities aided in the educational and professional development of teachers.

With O'Connor and Cordova's (2010) study in mind as a model for the current research, the following review of pertinent literature focuses on three main topics: learning and learners, motivation, and support. These three topics proved to be recurrent themes in both the O'Connor and Cordova study in 2010 and my pre-dissertation pilot study conducted in 2015. The following sections of this review examines the learners even further and then identifies different types of motivation and support systems.

### **Learning and Learners**

Learning, at the simplest form, is the acquisition of knowledge. The epistemological origins of learning, sources knowledge, and their connections to the environment, date back centuries. Driscoll (2000) suggests that early philosophers questioned where knowledge originates: experience or reasoning and contemplation about the world around us or perhaps knowledge is inherited and with us from birth. Rationalism and empiricism, derived from

philosophers back as far as 427 B.C., help to put our understanding of *what is learning* into perspective. Rationalism, which can be traced back to Plato (427-347 B.C.), refers to knowledge being derived from reasoning without utilizing the senses. Plato believed that things in the world are to be *explored* through the senses yet we learn new ideas by thinking about and reasoning with what we have already learned. Driscoll (2000) asserts, “learning is recalling what exists in the mind. Information acquired with the senses by observing, listening, tasting, smelling, or touching constitutes raw materials rather than ideas. The mind is innately structured to reason and provide meaning to incoming sensory information” (p. 5). Being able to see, touch, or hear something allows us to become aware of the physical nature of learning however upon reflection and connection to things we already know, we begin to learn the true nature of objects and opportunities. Learning, from the rationalist prospective is innate, intuitive, and can take place without having to rely on experience.

On the other hand, empiricism gives weight to the idea that experience is the only means for acquiring true knowledge. Derived from Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), empiricism refers the world around us providing the “basis for human sense impressions, which, in turn, are interpreted as lawful (consistent, unchanging) by the mind,” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 6). These experiences with the world around us are not hinged upon sensory impressions but more so by the data that can be derived from the environment. Driscoll (2000) asserted that in contrast to Plato, “Aristotle believed that ideas do not exist independently of the external world. The latter [the external world] is the source of all knowledge” (p. 6).

Rationalism and empiricism, both widely researched and documented over centuries, still apply to learning and knowledge acquisition in contemporary education. In an internet-based search of the frequency of mentions of the key words rationalism and empiricism in literature

and research, the results showed a peak in the span of time between 1958 and 1962. At the same time, researchers were beginning to study adult learners more closely.

In the 1960s when adult learning and andragogy were becoming more prominent in research, definitions of learning discussed knowledge acquisition through experience and changes in behavior. For decades researchers have developed numerous ways to define learning. Shuell (1996) asserts that no one definition of learning is universally accepted by practitioners, theorists, or researchers. Crow and Crow (1963, p. 1) discussed that learning involves change and the acquisition of habits, attitudes and knowledge. Learning enables individuals to make adjustments, personal and social, and the concept of change is inherent in the concept of learning. Burton (1963) also shared his understanding of learning as a change in the individual as a result of interactions that the person has with the environment. By having these experiences with the environment, the learner becomes more capable of adequately dealing with environmental challenges. Gagne (1965) defined learning as, “a change in human disposition or capability, which can be retained, and which is not simply ascribable to the process of growth.” Similarly, Hilgard and Bower (1966) propose:

Learning is the process by which an activity originates or is changed through reacting to an encountered situation, provided that the characteristics of the change in activity cannot be explained on the basis of native response tendencies, maturation, or temporary states of the organism. (p. 2)

These definitions of learning from the 1960s all demonstrate agreement as being defined as a change in behavior resulting from experiences. From this we can surmise experiential learning is a necessary component to learning and development for students of all ages.

More recently, researchers are continuing to develop interpretations of learning, not only by the action of learning but also by discussing how educators would know that learning actually took place. Simply experiencing something or being exposed to new knowledge would not be considered learning but the application of the knowledge in a situation would show how that true learning had taken place. Learning is inferential in nature; we cannot see that learning is taking place but we can identify that learning has taken place by means of varied assessment and application of knowledge. Schunk (2016) stated that “learning involves a changed capacity to behave in a given fashion because it is not uncommon for people to learn skills, knowledge, beliefs or behaviors without demonstrating them at the time the learning occurs” (p. 4). Similarly, Driscoll (2000) asserts that learning is a “persisting change in human performance or performance potential” (p. 9). Learners must be able to demonstrate their learning in some way. In order for the knowledge acquisition to be considered true learning, Driscoll (2000) explains that “a change in performance or performance potential must come about as a result of the learner’s experience and interaction with the world” (p. 9).

Researchers continue to discuss how we can define learning and are looking to more specific, directed learning strategies. Active learning, for example, is being researched widely and provides opportunities for learning to be more engaging for students and encouraging learners to be less reliant on the teacher for knowledge acquisition. Collins and O’Brien (2003) defined active learning as “the process of having students engage in some activity that forces them to reflect upon ideas and how they are using those ideas” (p. 5). Student engagement in an active learning environment requires students to assess their own understanding while participating in and contributing to the learning experiences of others as well.

These definitions show how learning is related to behavioral and social aspects of the specific adult learner. In higher education, experience and environment are key factors in learning. While we know that learning varies by location, curriculum design, environmental conditions and other factors, the basis for what learning is and how we acquire knowledge transcends across geographical, chronological, and philosophical boundaries.

**The adult learner.** Continuing education for adults has taken place over centuries, however a clear definition of exactly what universities and researchers consider as an adult learner varies. Based on the research of the Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy and the U.S. Department of Education (2002-2005), the Southern Regional Education Board defines adult learners as “a diverse group – typically age 25 or older – with a wide range of education and cultural backgrounds, adult responsibilities and job experiences” (SREB, 2017). Similarly, the University College at Illinois State University describes an adult learner as being “someone who is pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree, but does not meet the definition of a “traditional” college student” (ISU, 2017). More specifically, the University College suggests that an adult learner is an independent student that may be employed full-time and/or have dependents of their own. A 2015 study defined adult learners in the United States as being differentiated from other categories of learners based on their chronological age being considered a legal adult at the age of eighteen (Sogunro, 2015). While these definitions of adult learners cite different age ranges, they are consistent in stating that the adult learner is typically a non-traditional student who has increased responsibility to other entities during the time they engage in higher education.

Peterson and Ray (2013) explain an adult learner’s approach higher education: “there were three meanings for adult education: the *process* by which adults continue to learn after



completing formal schooling, *organized activities* for adults offered by a variety of institutions to accomplish specific educational objectives, and a *movement* or *field* related to this learning” (Peterson & Ray, 2013). Although experience often guides learning (Kolb, 1984), other aspects of life contribute to the success of adult education. In support of experiential learning, Moore (2010) stated that the purpose of adult learning is to create value in educational experiences for the learner in order to foster desire and engagement in learning opportunities.

Moore (2010) suggests that critical thinking and decision-making are co-existing processes that are integral in adult education. He proposes that information gathered through experiences stagnates as learners may not take time to manage the critical thinking process. Critical thinking is paramount for adult learners as the process helps the learner to synthesize the information they learn and adapt their knowledge from the collegiate experience to their personal life. Moore’s discussion of experiences suggests that reflective practices vary for all learners. Moore also discusses how reflectiveness and critical thinking at the time of the experience enhance learning and engage the learner in deeper thinking and understanding rather than learners engaging in an experience and attempting to recall their learning at a later time.

To further address the necessity of reflective practices and evaluating one’s own experiences, Kelaher-Young and Carver (2013) conducted a study focusing on the self-assessment processes of preservice teachers in the Midwest. It used an introductory course in a large secondary education program to test how preservice teachers reported learning about themselves after completing standardized self-assessments. The researchers recognized that ultimately teachers hold the responsibility for not only teaching content, but also helping students explore how to learn. Part of this exploration to learn involves accessing knowledge previously

learned through some form of reflection. Therefore, the teacher at all levels of education must model the learning process and must demonstrate proactiveness, self-awareness, reflectiveness.

In the Kelaher-Young and Carver (2013) study of preservice teachers, researchers not only questioned the reflections of preservice teachers' perceptions of self but also how teacher candidates' beliefs as learners informed a developing understanding of themselves as teachers. Data sets, consisting of four course documents, from 23 students in an introductory educational psychology course were used as artifacts. Researchers reviewed and coded data then noted repeated topics of interest including self-regulated learning and goal orientation theory. They also compared and contrasted patterns within their codes to identify three categories of shifts in thinking about the students' beliefs in themselves as learners from significant to moderate to no shift at all. In the study, students utilized self-assessment to connect theory and practice and developed increased opportunities for reflection based on the completion of individual measures related to student progress within their required course. Researchers referred to the growth of learning in both preservice teachers and their professors and also explored how intrinsic and extrinsic motivations help to encourage success in adult learning.

After a full review of data and the analysis of codes, themes, and shifts in student thinking, Kelaher-Young and Carter (2013) concluded that self-assessment can be helpful in aiding teacher candidates to identify their own beliefs about learning and learning strategies. This level of understanding will help new teachers to connect themselves with concepts from literature and learning theory and will facilitate in the development of their future instructional practices. This analysis suggests that the benefits of deliberate learning-focused self-assessment is useful in helping candidates reveal their assumptions and beliefs about the profession and themselves as learners. As noted in this study, "teachers are typically not asked to look back at

themselves as “model learners” in order to understand learning and teaching” (Kelaheer-Young & Carter, 2013, p. 126). However, using reflective self-assessment coupled with programmatic approaches could be a well-suited plan for prompting reflection on student learning.

**Reflective practice.** Professionals in the education field do not limit their learning to only the time they have spent as a student. The varied experiences of educators often provide opportunities for later reflection and additional learning after the initial exposure to new knowledge has taken place. Reflecting on what has already been learned aids individuals to develop a deeper understanding of how learners conduct their tasks and proves to be “important in informing the profession about aspects of practice” (Loughran, 2002, p. 33). Loughran (2002) also suggests that reflective practice is a necessary component to success as a profession. He posits that “the knowledge base of the profession is developed and refined in ways that help the practitioner to be an effective and informed professional” (Loughran, 2002, p. 34). In many university teacher preparation programs (Richert, 1990; Russell, 1997; Valli, 1993), reflection is utilized throughout coursework and serves as a foundation on which all learned knowledge builds upon.

The reflective nature of the current research study highlighted experiences of others through their stories. As Brookfield (1995) explains, reflective practice literature is important for multiple reasons, one being the opportunity to examine a plethora of approaches that impact how we teach and learn and also because the literature is “providing opportunities for us to understand the stories of how teachers live through reflective practice” (Brookfield, 1995). By examining the stories of ourselves and others, educators are able to better understand what they know and how knowledge is developed as a means to grow as a professional. Utilizing retrospective reflection (Van Manen, 1991), educators are encouraged to think back to varied

experiences, make connections about their past and current learning and teaching, and develop their ideas of successful practice based on the experiences of themselves and others.

For example, university professor Jane West analyzed her own professional practices of studying adult learning theory while teaching a group of doctoral students in a 2013 reflective essay. From concept development to scheduling and the conflict of challenges and planning, she determined that her own teaching practices were departing from her own ideals as the rigor and demands of higher education were forcing a change in pacing due to course calendars and other professional responsibilities. After considering her beliefs as a social constructivist and understanding that human beings construct their own knowledge, the growing expectations had placed the researcher into a “habit of constructing (my) course outlines according to what was logistically easier to manage” (West, 2013). After continued reflection, West realized professional changes had taken place in her planning and design as a result of increased professional responsibility. West (2013) recalled her process of planning for her courses: what had once been based on concepts and student understanding was now dictated by assignment tasks and deadlines. Where she had once developed a sense of deep conceptual learning with her students was replaced with a course arc that seemed to be disjointed pieces of curriculum that fulfilled assignment requirements rather than cohesive learning.

Reflective practice and experiential learning go hand-in-hand to illustrate how educators hone their craft. By reflecting on experiences and learning opportunities, teachers are able to make judgments and adjustments based on the outcomes of their learning and teaching. Reflection conditions educators to think not only about the here and now but also about the past and how experiences from the past influence what teachers do each day.

**Lifelong learning and higher education.** Adult learning is deep-rooted in the understanding that adults must continue learning in order to improve upon their current situation. Many educators, of all levels of students, participate in opportunities to extend their knowledge as a result of reflective practice and the teacher's desire for professional growth. Lifelong learning can be simply defined as gaining additional knowledge over time in and beyond the structure of a classroom. Kolb (2015) asserts that lifelong learning is no longer considered an "inspiring aspiration" (p. 334) but a necessary reality in our changing society. He explains:

The transformative global, social, economic, and technological conditions that were envisioned over forty years ago have come to fruition in a way that requires a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between learning and education. From a front-loaded, system-driven educational structure dominated by classroom learning, we are in the process of transitioning to a new reality where individual learners are becoming more responsible for the direction of their own learning in a multitude of learning environments that span their lifetime. (Kolb D. A., 2015, p. 334)

Lifelong learning for teachers consists of continued growth, professionally and personally, to help educators to develop their career path as well as become familiar with new research and trends happening worldwide. Lifelong learning can be attained through professional development opportunities, reflective practice, engagement with professional organizations or higher education for career advancement or personal commitment. Teachers seek professional development opportunities and learn from experiences within their school districts and schools, with educational organizations and other teachers through collaboration, and within the community to develop a better understanding of knowledge as they encounter new experiences. While learning is not limited to higher education, educators must continue to grow in all aspects

of education through multiple avenues of knowledge acquisition. Many professionals seek to obtain an advanced degree that extends their knowledge base and often consult a mentor or support teacher regularly.

Teachers of all experience levels are having very similar challenges and successes in classrooms, which led some to pursue advanced degrees and return to the university setting to better themselves as educators. Many educators seek professional experiences that allow them to learn more about areas that cause struggle in the classroom. These opportunities for growth often stem from situations such as lack of resources, behavioral challenges, student learning deficits, and many more factors. These impact classrooms and students and create difficulty that new teachers sometimes do not expect. As Knowles (1990) agrees in regards to teacher classroom challenges:

The problem is that the number of variables affecting the teaching-learning situation (the students' background, genetic equipment, subconscious state, motivation, aspirations) the teacher (the personality training, educational philosophy, skill) and the environment (social, cultural, physical, administrative forces), are so great, changeable, and hard to measure and control. (Knowles M. , 1990, p. 106)

Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) developed a generalized review of research surrounding what students gain from higher education aside from their degree. In the review, Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) exposed the financial constraints and informational challenges that college students engage in when deciding whether higher education is appropriate at that time. Although the body of research focuses on first-time entrants, the challenges and thought processes can be compared to those of students considering a return to continue degree programs beyond an initial certification degree. Teachers may return to school to develop a part

of their professional selves, to extend their knowledge in a given field, or to explore a new field. Those who seek advanced degrees tend to choose their own approach to learning, which vastly depends on the intended outcome of their higher education experience. Understanding the relationship learners have with their own learning and their experiences in higher education institutions is vital to understanding how experiential learning impacted teachers with concurrent experiences.

### **Summary**

This first section of the literature review discussed how higher education impacts the experiences and outcomes for adult learners. Reflective practice, lifelong learning and research studies, all related to students engaging in continuing education, were discussed in order to better understand the relationship participants in this study may have with their education, their lives, and their experiences. The following section targets topics of discussion surrounding the recurring themes from the O'Connor and Cordova (2010) study in Business Education and my pre-dissertation pilot study conducted in 2015 in the field of Teacher Education. These themes of motivation and support are essential to the development of this study and understanding how the experiences of teachers who concurrently pursue higher education are additionally impacted by their own motivation as well as support from outside sources.

### **The Drive to Continue**

Previous research (Iliya & Ifeoma, 2015; Libao, et al., 2016; Orden, 2017; Tentama & Pranungsari, 2016) has concluded that students in higher education experience varying levels of motivation and support throughout their enrollment in post-baccalaureate programs. While some students are internally motivated to be successful, others are motivated by external factors and even more students are motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Similarly, students

are supported in a number of ways. The following review examines the components of motivation that may have direct impact on concurrent teachers'/students' drive to achieve their goals. Familial and social support, academic, and professional support is also discussed in order to understand the importance of support and how those support systems could impact the students' success.

## **Motivation**

Motivation, as discussed by Beck (2004) is derived from the Latin verb *movere* which means *to move*. It is a broad theoretical concept that we often use to explain why people engage in particular actions at particular times (Beck, 2004; Sogunro, 2015). Sogunro (2015) concluded that human behaviors such as concentration, perseverance, attention, initiative and effort are all motivational processes that are apparent in learning settings. These internal processes allow us to focus on tasks and skills being accomplished.

In the field of education, many teachers are driven in their careers because they are working to impact the lives of children. Teaching is a profession that is not often driven by monetary gain or riches but by motivation to be better and to do better for children. In preparation courses, preservice teachers are instructed on what to do in certain situations, how to handle adversity, and how to teach, but often teacher preparation courses cannot prepare teachers for the daily emotional challenges that teaching can bring.

As cited in UK National Adult Learning Survey (2010), adult learners are more likely to be motivated to engage in continued education and further learning than other groups. The 2010 survey shows, adult learners are considered to be more motivated in a generalized sense. Sogunro (2015) agreed that motivation is a necessary component for success for adult learners in



higher education. He concluded that while motivation cannot be physically measured, a positive relationship exists between adult learning and motivation.

Types of motivations vary from person to person. The common qualifiers related to motivation include intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. “At one end of the “motivation spectrum” is intrinsic motivation, which reflects the highest degree of self-determination” (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010). While these divisions of motivation are common in the literature, there is minimal research discussing effects of motivation of students at the graduate level.

**Intrinsic motivation.** Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Eggen and Kauchak (1994), is an internal response to needs within the learner such as competence, curiosity or growth.

Intrinsically motivated adult learners tend to have a personal satisfaction or point of success associated with their endeavors of higher education. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) describe the engagement of intrinsically motivated learners as having a hunger for more information.

Intrinsically motivated learners are involved in the learning, they want to be present and their self-efficacy is paramount.

Moore (2010) asserts that adult learners learn through independent and interdependent experiences and “have a drive to gain new knowledge that they consider as being important to them and their lives” (p. 2). He concludes that when learners take on responsibility on their own and seek to gain new knowledge, they will be enabled to “progress mentally, provide workplace advancement, improve social aspects of their life, justify their beliefs or behaviors, or change their beliefs or behaviors” (p.2). The intrinsic motivation for adult learners serves as a catalyst for the learner to seek the answers to challenges, provide for their personal growth, and to engage in tasks, activities and learning experiences that will fulfill their goals and desires.

Similarly, Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) lends explanation on how adult learners' internal motivation and determination builds on life experiences to continue personal and professional success. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) encompasses the study of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how human personality develops through the experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2000) assert, "The fullest representations of humanity show people to be curious, vital, and self-motivated. At their best, they are agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly" (p. 68). Self-motivation and determination to be successful internally encourage learners to be better and to do better regardless of adversity.

**Extrinsic Motivation.** Extrinsic motivation can be equated to outcomes that are not in direct relation to the activity in which the student (whether adult or child) is engaged. Sogunro (2015) asserts, "things that we can control are categorized as extrinsic motivators and are good at keeping a behavior going." He continues to discuss the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations by confirming that extrinsic motivations may be the catalyst for some behaviors in adult learners, but over time, "intrinsic motivators are needed to keep the behavior (learning) strong and fresh" (Sogunro, 2015, p. 24). Similarly, Deckers (2005) explains, "extrinsic motivation comes from external sources and is mostly driven by environmental contingencies such as money, good grades, or the approval of others" (Deckers, 2005).

Progressing in career and education are often driven by a yearning for an advanced certification in pursuit of financial gain, promotion, and completion of personal goals. These expectations serve as strong external motivators for adults pursuing continuing education. Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight and Lei (2010) posit that in the absence however, of an internal or intrinsic motivator, it is common that higher education students revert to extrinsic

motivators as their main source of reasoning for learning. The interconnected relationship of the two main types of motivations show that for some extrinsically motivated actions, behaviors are often carried out as a means to an end rather than simply an end itself.

**Impacts of motivation.** As Ralph (1998) discusses, motivation to succeed in any educational setting is not limited accomplishing tasks on a checklist but that the “degree of motivation to learn may be determined by observing the learner’s effort to engage in a particular activity” (p.1). “motivation to learn is not solely influenced by external stimulation or teacher reinforcement, but that it is a product of a complex blend of individuals’ needs, attitudes, emotions, competencies, background experiences, and inherited traits” (Ralph, 1998). Ralph continues to discuss the internal motivation necessary for student success:

This effort [the degree of motivation] is influenced by: (a) the value that the learner places on the task, and (b) the expectation the learner has on being successful at it.

Because these internal motivational states become deep-rooted in each learner’s psyche, teachers ultimately cannot motivate students to do anything: they can only endeavor to affect some of the variables that interact to stimulate students’ motivation to learn.

(Ralph, 1998, p. 1)

While motivation is the responsibility of the student, Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) support the idea that “motivation should be incorporated into a structured and systematic form of instruction” (p. 189). This structure, as first introduced by Lewin (1951) discusses learning as a result of change. “Learning occurs as a result of change in cognitive structures produced by changes in two types of forces: (1) change in the structure of the cognitive field itself, or (2) change in the internal needs or motivation of the individual” (Knowles, 1988; Knowles, 1998). Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) clarify Knowles reference to change by

explaining that the goal-oriented nature of human behavior causes a change in motivations or reason for certain learning based on what adults are currently motivated to learn as “they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy” (p.189).

Motivation, in any form, can directly impact the experiences of adult learners. In all levels of education, most learners align themselves with methods that will direct them to be successful. Whether self-motivated or pushed towards success from outside sources, students work towards attaining their goals in order to become the professional they want to be in their respective fields.

### **Support Systems**

My pre-dissertation pilot study conducted in 2015 and a similar study in Business Education (O’Connor & Cordova, 2010) concluded that another major implication in the success of students pursuing advanced degrees was the support received from various entities. Students reported varied social/emotional support from family, friends, and mentors as well as the academic support received from their college or university. Current available research in these areas supports the findings that student support at the graduate level was lacking; several current studies (Civitci, 2014; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013; Hesser & Gregory, 2016; Rodriguez, 2012) highlight the necessity and value of varied support services at the undergraduate level. While most universities service both undergraduate and graduate students, much of the research surrounding student support services on college and university campuses details those programs geared towards first-year students, transfer students and remedial students (Bettenger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; Blake, 2007; Coates, 2014; Hesser & Gregory, 2016). However, in a random examination of selected university websites I found that many host writing workshops, math centers, career fairs, and other outreach programs and support services that are available to

students of all education levels (LSU Support Programs, 2017; NSC Student Resources, 2017; UF Student Life, 2017; UNO Student Life, 2017; TU Student Life and Development, 2017).

Bettinger, Boatman and Long (2013), Coates (2014), and Williamson, Goosen, and Gonzalez (2014) acknowledge that increasing student support systems and providing varied opportunities for students have had a positive impact on student retention in higher education. However, students must typically seek out these services through their own motivations to be successful. Student support at the undergraduate level requires the student taking initiative to locate a service provided by the university. This is in contrast to the post-baccalaureate students' experience where support does not often come from the university but rather the collaboration of students in the form of social and academic support via study groups or other student created opportunities.

**Social support.** When students begin an endeavor of great magnitude such as seeking advanced education, it is normal for adult learners to seek acceptance and approval from key people in their lives. Social support can be defined as a “mechanism to manage emotions” (Turkpour & Mehdinezhad, 2016). Being able to express and manage feelings during a rigorous educational process is necessary in order to maintain a positive outlook. Turkpour and Mehdinezhad (2016) affirm that social protection is also necessary and serves as attention, affection, and assistance from people who support one another within families and social networks. Turkpour and Mehdinezhad (2016) assert that support outside that university classroom has increased benefits however students tend to communicate their needs with professors only in the classroom. They suggest that these interactions, although influential, do not allow for class communication at the social level because “class interactions are more common among those who do not have the required motivation to communicate beyond the

setting of the classroom” (p. 53). Turkpour and Mehedinezhad (2016) recommend continued research in other models of communication for teachers (professors) to communicate with their students in alternate settings to promote increased support outside of the classroom setting.

**Academic support.** Academic support comes in many styles at the collegiate level and encompasses services provided by the institution in order to help fulfill students’ needs related to the students and career development. It is necessary for some students to have a strong connection with their university for progress and success as Tinto (2012) discussed in relation to developing higher education programs that promote successful degree completion. Coates (2014) makes mention of the importance of support from fellow students and staff at the collegiate level stating, “the amount of contact students have with academic staff, influences students’ decisions to withdraw from their studies... research also show that personal adjustment and social integration seem to be as important to retention as academic integration.” Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) agree that social integration of academics and personal experiences are equally important to student attrition as academic support. Their research shows that teacher confirmation and additional academic support has enhanced students’ abilities to adapt to university life. Similarly, Jones (2008) suggests that some students feel more positively about their learning experience when their teachers provide high-level support away from the class setting as opposed to those who offer little or no academic support beyond the class requirement.

Thompson and Maser (2009) explain the adaptive aspects of academic support through the use of support groups. Students worked together to provide educational and emotional coping strategies to support each other. Thompson and Maser’s study (2009), distinguishes between using social adaptations and social networking to provide university to support to each other. The students helped one another personally and emotionally by raising self-esteem and trust, sharing

problems and inconveniences, and creating new positive experiences within the university setting. In doing so, students were establishing a stronger connection to their university.

Engaging in academically driven groups can provide collaborative conversation for students and has the potential to lead to deeper understanding, active engagement with learning, and a more positive outcome for students who may struggle when working on a task alone.

**Professional support.** Professional support is different for every teacher. A constant among the teacher community is the availability of professional groups and organizations that can provide support to teachers of all experience levels. Nationally and locally recognized organizations provide conferences, seminars and other opportunities for teachers from all educational and experience levels to come together for professional development and sessions to provide support for teacher improvement and empowerment. During these experiences, teachers are provided opportunities to network and connect with teachers from different locations in order to establish connections for future reflection and collaboration.

**Collaboration.** A large part of teaching is the ability to effectively collaborate with various professional communities. Collaboration is a necessary component in supporting new teachers, struggling teachers, or experienced teachers going through a new phase in his or her career. The support of a collaborative team can be critical in developing a supportive environment for all learners. Korth, Erickson, and Hall (2009) shared how universities nationwide are developing educational partnerships to collaborate with local teachers to provide more impactful learning experiences for educators and to help provide increased teacher preparation and improved student outcomes. These partnerships are opening the lines of communication between the undergraduate and graduate students and faculty and local teachers to provide academic support for learners of all ages. Likewise, in a 2010 Canadian study,

researchers investigated a professional learning community through collaboration of cooperating teachers and university-based educators (Nielsen, Triggs, Clarke, & Collins, 2010). The study, conducted as a result of research with cooperating teachers in British Columbia, was aimed to illustrate the complexity of topics to promote and enable teacher learning for both student teachers and their cooperating teachers. Researchers merged findings from other researchers to develop an understanding of how communities of practice assist professional learning:

Building on Lave and Wegner's (1991) work and following Latour (1993) and Nespor (1994), we regard a community of practice as a dynamic collective that seeks to maintain coherence while agents – people, ideas, and practices – continue to influence one another, continually responding to change or difference. (Nielsen, Triggs, Clarke, & Collins, 2010, p. 841)

Over the course of the “conversations” with participants in the study, members were able to collaborate and “generate new ways to think about the practicum and their work with teacher candidates” (p. 861). This sense of inherent togetherness aids all members in creating relationships that are conducive to building a stronger foundation for collaboration among teachers and their cohorts. The collaboration of these groups provides experience in working with various personality types and also supports a sense of togetherness that greatly prepares teachers for collaboration at the school level with their team, administration, and potentially full-circle with a continued university partnership.

At the school level, building a supportive working community among the various professionals involved allows for open lines of communication and development of continued professional interactions. Through these collaborations with university faculty, teachers, and their students, partnerships continue to lay the foundation for successful teachers. Korth,



Erickson, and Hall (2009) explain the focus of strong university to school partnerships, “One of the primary focuses of these partnerships is to broaden the preparation of preservice teachers by providing quality field experiences thus preparing teachers who are more qualified to move from university training to public school teaching positions” (p. 1). By providing preservice teachers with opportunities to enhance their skills prior to entering their own classrooms, universities and education programs are providing a practical model for classroom preparation. In an effort to create partnerships in education, universities often require teachers to collaborate together to discuss teaching practices, in doing so, universities are developing teachers who are able to reflect and respond to their learning and how this effects student success.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this review of literature has explored areas of research that are necessary in understanding the experience of teachers who concurrently pursue higher education. The O’Connor and Cordova (2010) study was outlined and served as a model for design for the current study as their findings in Business Education support continued research as it relates to teachers. A thorough examination of adult learners and their experiences with higher education has been outlined. Motivation and support systems were discussed and were shown to be driving forces, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, for teachers to pursue their goals in the field of education. In closing, post-baccalaureate students are “facing challenges over and above those of their younger peers. Most continue working while balancing their studies with family responsibilities or concurrent employment” (Bettenger, Boatman, & Long, 2013, p. 105). This study adds to the growing research base in higher education and identifies the struggles and growth of this subset of educators.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Teachers who have pursued advanced degrees, such as a master's degree, are common in schools and classrooms throughout our country. In the 2015 Digest of Education Statistics, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 56% of certified teachers across the country held a master's degree or higher. However, research into their experiences with education is not readily available. This exploratory phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursued graduate studies. The findings of this study developed a snapshot of how adult learning has provided opportunities for personal growth and assisted in achieving professional goals for a group of teachers in southern Louisiana. This chapter explained the methodological decisions for the research study.

#### **Methods**

Qualitative research methods “involve an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These naturalistic methods allow researchers to hear the words that participants use to detail their experiences. The researcher provides personal experiences through bracketing in order to identify the lens through which the research is encountered. In doing so, I shared my own personal experiences as a teacher and learner. As Creswell (2013) explains, bracketing my experiences does not remove me completely from the study but allows for my experiences to be identified yet set aside so that the focus of the research is the participants' experiences with concurrent teaching and learning (p.78-79).

In this research study, phenomenological methods developed a “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). I focused on describing what all participants had in common as well as how their paths differed, as they experienced the central phenomenon of concurrently pursuing a master’s degree in the field of education while maintaining a full-time teaching schedule. Creswell (2013) explained that phenomenology has a strong philosophical basis drawing on the writings of German mathematician Edmund Husserl as well as others who expanded his views. There are multiple arguments for the use of phenomenology in social sciences, psychology, education and many other fields. While Moustakas (1994), Stewart and Mickunas (1990), and van Manen (1990) shared different perspectives for the philosophical basis of phenomenology, common links were evident among all approaches. Researchers agree that phenomenology involves determining a topic rooted in values, social meaning, and significance. Conducting interviews, with follow-ups if necessary, helped me to better understand the lived experience of participants. Data analysis illuminated commonalities and essences from participant interviews and focus group discussions.

This research study focused on the phenomenon of teachers who concurrently pursued a degree in higher education. By following the research methods outlined in this chapter, I developed trust and comfort with participants so that their experiences were shared in a non-threatening manner. Upon completion of interviews and a focus group, analysis of participant findings contributed to the existing literature supporting teachers and career advancement. The findings of this study identified how concurrent education and teaching impacts life and decision making for the select group of participants. This study informs teacher practice, provides insight

on graduate student expectations, and highlights the experiences of teachers pursuing higher education.

### **Research Question**

This phenomenological study gave participants the opportunity to share their experiences, feelings, successes, and challenges from their degree programs to illustrate how adult learning experiences provide opportunities for growth and goal attainment. To do so, the overarching research question was:

*What are the personal and professional experiences of classroom teachers who have concurrently pursued a master's degree in education?*

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, 2013) was integrated in the focus group protocols to prompt discussion about reflective practice involving experiences in the university and K-12 classrooms and how those experiences work together to develop teacher practice.

### **Site Selection and Gatekeepers**

Upon approval of The University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board, the researcher began contacting school district liaisons to request permission to conduct the study. Once granted permission, school administrators were contacted via email for recommendations of teachers who currently hold a master's degree. Recruitment took place by emailing all the potential participants recommended by administration as well as district personnel. Background information about the study and its intended use was disclosed in the recruitment email. An initial informative questionnaire was provided to potential participants at that time. Although there was no direct benefit for participants, the findings of the study adds to the literature base for teachers, teacher educators, and prospective students in higher education.

For the purposes of this research study, selected participants were provided with an informed consent letter. It was not necessary to gain access to school buildings or campuses. Interviews and communications took place outside of school hours, and away from teacher classrooms. Participant interviews were held one-on-one and in-person neutral locations of the participants' choosing to ensure that they were able to share their experiences freely without being hindered by their surroundings.

## **Participants**

Purposive, or purposeful, sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select from a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam S. B., 2009, p. 77). Creswell (2013) suggests a heterogeneous group of participants ranging from three to twenty individuals while Moustakas (1994) recommends participant groups of ten to twenty. For this research study, the aim was recruit a group of ten to twelve participants in order to achieve diversity in the areas of age, gender, ethnic background and educational experience.

Using purposive and strategic criterion-based sampling methods, I attempted to attain participants who met the study requirements. Over sixty recruitment emails were sent to teachers across three large school districts in southeastern Louisiana. An examination of the initial informative questionnaire provided to all those requesting participation during the recruitment, it was necessary that the participants to be selected fit within the following criteria:

1. 3 or more years teaching experience at the time of data collection
2. Completed a master's degree in education while teaching full-time
3. Completed degree program within the last 6 years.

4. Currently employed in the education field – classroom teacher (general education, E.S.L. special education, etc.), school administrator, district personnel, etc.

While it was intended to use the initial informative questionnaire and the study criteria as a guide for strategic selection of participants, only twelve participants returned the survey within the two-week participant selection time-frame. Those twelve respondents represented variances in diverse backgrounds, age groups and levels of teaching experience, which aided in providing information-rich data. Prior to beginning the interview process, one participant withdrew from the study after struggling to arrange time in the daily schedule to meet for interviewing. The eleven participants and their demographic information are listed below in Table 3.1.

Teacher-scholar participants had completed at least three years of in-class teaching and were able to have a strong foundational basis for their discussions about teaching. Three years of teaching experience also provided a timespan so that teachers were able to complete their master's degree courses of study while concurrently teaching. It was important that all participants had completed their master's degree in education within the last five years so that the memories and experiences were fresh and readily describable. There was no defined age range in this study as the key factor for research revolved around time spent in a dual-capacity as teacher and learner.

Participants were all provided an informed consent letter to review and were also given the opportunity to voluntarily opt-out of the study at any time.

**Table 3.1: Participant Demographic Data**

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Teaching Experience <sup>2</sup>	Master's Degree Focus and Year of Completion	Program Type	Grade(s) Taught During Master's Program	Content Taught During Master's Program
Bryan	M	33	Caucasian	5	Elementary Education (2015)	online	8, 9, 10	English
Gabby	F	26	Caucasian	4	Educational Leadership (2016)	face-to-face	1	All Subjects
Jennifer	F	34	Caucasian	10	Curriculum & Instruction (2010) Educational Leadership (2014)	face-to-face	4	Math & Science
Karen	F	52	African-American	24	Curriculum & Instruction (2012)	face-to-face	1, 2	All Subjects
Kristine	F	29	Caucasian	6	Elementary Education (2015)	online	3	All Subjects
Patrick	M	32	Multi-Ethnic <sup>3</sup>	10	Educational Leadership (2015)	face-to-face	4	ELA
Renee	F	31	African-American	6	Curriculum & Instruction (2014)	online	5	Math
Shantell	F	33	African-American	11	Reading and Literacy (2017)	online	1, 2	All Subjects
Stephen	M	48	Hispanic <sup>4</sup>	23	Educational Leadership (2012)	face-to-face	5	ELA
Sydney	F	43	Caucasian	17	Educational Leadership (2014)	face-to-face	1	All Subjects
Tony	M	32	African-American	9	Elementary Education (2013)	hybrid	4, 5	ELA

<sup>2</sup> Teaching experience at the time of data collection

<sup>3</sup> Participant self-identified multiple ethnicities including: Caucasian, French, Irish

<sup>4</sup> Participant self-identified Hispanic descent from the country of Honduras

## **Data Collection**

In this study, three methods of data collection were used for analysis. An initial informative questionnaire was administered during recruiting to each respondent to retrieve demographic data and information regarding teaching experience, educational experience, and professional experience and was used to confirm eligibility for the study. These survey responses were then used in conjunction with semi-structured interviews (Merriam S. B., 2009, p. 90) to personalize questioning during the interview process to continue building relationships throughout the research study. Interview questions, developed prior to beginning data collection, varied among participants due to the semi-structured style of interviewing. The final data collection tool was focus groups with the same participants to share thoughts and experiences in an open forum. The purpose of the focus groups was to “bring together a group of individuals representative of the population whose ideas are of interest” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In these group discussions, participants discussed concrete experiences related to their education and careers and shared how knowledge transformation took place over time. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (2013) served as a guide for the discussion.

Data collection took place in locations determined to be a comfortable for participants, where they could speak freely without worry of who may be nearby or interacting with the conversation in any way. At the initial session, participants decided how they would like to be identified in the study, first name or pseudonym, and that identity remained in place for the duration of the study to maintain their anonymity in the written documents. Once data was collected, digital information was stored on a digital recording device and a laptop computer, which are both password protected and secured with internet security software to aid in the prevention of digital vulnerability. Notes taken during interviews and focus groups were used to



identify changes in body language, researcher thoughts, new lines of questioning, or any feedback that may be shared during the sessions. These notes were kept securely in the researcher journal, which also included methodological decision-making, research notes, and thought processes, and a data binder. Tangible forms of data collection were also stored in the data binder, such as interview transcriptions, and after data analysis documents, and thematic development drafts, which was kept in the researcher's possession when in-use, to ensure confidentiality.

Prior to data analysis, notes that were taken at interview sessions and focus groups analyzed as a secondary data source. Throughout the data collection process participants were provided with copies of their interview and focus group transcriptions for member checking. This process ensured that the transcribing of conversations was accurate and directly reflected the participants' thoughts. At the conclusion of the research and the data management timeline, all data will be appropriately destroyed via shredding, file erasure, and drive formatting.

**Initial informative questionnaire.** During recruitment, all respondents were asked to complete the initial informative questionnaire. The returned questionnaires served as the main source of data used for participant selection. Teachers who responded completed the questionnaire to the best of their ability. This questionnaire collected background and demographic information such as age, ethnicity, educational history, and teaching experience. While this information remained confidential, the responses from selected participants were used to direct questioning for interview sessions.

**Interviews.** An interview protocol was developed and guided the semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009). The protocol was designed to facilitate purposeful discussion and aided in obtaining "here-and-now constructions of events, feelings, motivations and concerns"

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Merriam (2009) explained, “less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). During the interview session, participants were guided through discussing experiences related to phases of life before, during, and after graduate school as well as any major career advancements or moves since their graduation. Due to the naturalistic flow of semi-structured interviews, individual interview sessions varied therefore the interview protocol was used to ensure that each participant was sharing similar aspects of their journey without having to follow a structured question/response/question again format. Interviews were conversational and the protocol helped to prompt redirection and clarification when necessary.

Various question types were used as Rubin and Rubin (2011) recommend to elicit responses from the participants. As Rubin and Rubin (2011) described, three types of questions were used: main questions, follow-up questions and probing questions. Questions encompassed many areas important to success and decision making for teacher-scholars such as feelings, experiences, opinions and values. Interviews were designed using a variation of interviewing called “opening the locks” (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Because this research relied heavily on the storytelling aspect of experiences, opening-the-locks was well suited to promote conversation that provided a portrait of the concurrent teacher/higher education student experience. The interviews focused on questions directly related to the experiences participants had and the emotions and feelings associated with those experiences. These questions guided the interview and prompted the participants to talk at length and depth about the research topic. Follow-up questions targeted different aspects of the experience, such as motivations, challenges and successes, necessary support, and other guiding questions to develop sound findings for the research question.

During the interview sessions, notes taken in the researcher journal and on the interview protocol notating body language, changes in mood either verbally or through facial expressions, fidgeting, or any other forms of data that were not readily identifying in the verbatim transcriptions (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

**Focus Groups.** Following the sessions and transcribing of interviews, eight of the eleven participants were able to participate in focus groups highlighting their most meaningful points growth in their higher education endeavors, specifically related to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2013). The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain high-quality data from discussion in a way that allowed participants to interact together and uncover beliefs, understandings, and commonalities about their own experiences.

The focus groups provided participants the opportunity to think back on their experiences and discuss how they learned and grew as teachers and students through those times. In doing so, the participants explored their experiences with learning while being able to respond to how the other participants felt as well. At the conclusion of each personal interview session, participants were provided with background information regarding Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015). As Macnaghten and Myers (2004) best summarize, "Focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives – but don't" (p. 65). The group setting allowed participants to delve deeper into conversation about aspects in their experiences and followed a river and channel interview method.

The river and channel method, as described by Rubin and Rubin (2011) differed from the opening-the-locks method of questioning used in the one-on-one interviews. While opening-the-locks allowed individuals to provide a broad depiction of their experiences over time, river and channel questioning allowed for the development of concepts and ideas among the group of

participants by having all participants discuss similarities in their experiences based on a directed path of questioning. Multiple main questions were planned in relation to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015) however the group guided how the discussion continued in regards to experiences and learning from them. This gave participants opportunities to listen to, comment on, and reflect upon experiences and how experiences, whether concrete or passive, helped the participants to develop as teachers and learners. The discussion questions, which were all be related to the overarching research question, also allowed for in-person member checking as any questions or comments were clarified immediately. Serving as the moderator, I tried to ensure that the discussion stayed on topic and that all participants were given an opportunity to provide input (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Data collected from focus groups was analyzed through line-by-line coding and analysis of themes and trends.

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion of each interview, a verbatim transcription was created from the digital recording files. Each interview was prepared for coding using a pseudonym-based identification marker to ensure that data remained anonymous yet flexible for analysis. Interview and focus group data were analyzed line by line in order to determine codes and to triangulate data across all transcriptions. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) explain: "Phenomenology tends to look at data thematically to extract essences and essentials of participant meanings" (p.8). Analysis was conducted by utilizing the line-by-line system and a standard code for each participant. Codes were then grouped into categories. Categories were combined to form themes representing key parts of the participant experiences. In this research, analysis was done through words, phrases and statements in order to restructure participant responses so that the data was compared, contrasted, analyzed, and used for pattern construction across participant and focus

group transcriptions. Jotted notes from interview sessions were also prepared for analysis. By preparing interview transcriptions and researcher notes, the text was refined to provide clear paths to analysis through coding.

**Coding.** As Merriam (2009) asserts, “assigning codes to pieces of data is the way you begin to construct categories” (p.179). Through the process of coding, I determined units of data that participants used to describe feelings or phenomena within their experiences. The units of data served as the keys to determining the answer to the research question. Throughout the coding process I created a listed code count in a qualitative codebook to keep a record of codes, code labels, definitions of the codes’ intent, and information about how each code is relative to the research (Creswell, 2014).

The process of open coding involved assigning shorthand labels to serve as symbolic meanings and descriptors for the information gleaned throughout the study (Merriam, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Open coding of individual interviews consisted of highlighting chunks of texts and identifying a word, or code, to represent the meaning of each text section and involved multiple readings of transcriptions to ensure accuracy of interpretations of text.

**Categories and themes.** Once the interviews had been coded, axial coding or the process of grouping open codes (Merriam, 2009) began. This allowed me to view open codes across interview sessions to identify recurrent categories and themes (Merriam, 2009) that participants disclosed in all data collection opportunities. A list of categories was kept in the qualitative codebook for reference and aided in the compilation of categories to determine themes among participants in the analysis of all collected data. Upon completion of coding for all interview sessions, the focus groups were scheduled and conducted. A secondary benefit to conducting the

focus group after the interview data was transcribed and coded was the opportunity for in-person member checking. Through the discussion of their experiences, member checking allowed for open discussion of similarities and differences in their educational and career backgrounds.

Transcriptions from the focus group were coded and analyzed using the same methods.

This data analysis process was repeated with follow-up responses through email member checking opportunities with all participants. Participants received my analysis of their individual data for review to ensure that I accurately captured their experiences, their thoughts, and their feelings. This allowed me to ensure that themes included data that was essential to the interpretation and understanding of participant data. The themes served to create a broad picture of participant experiences, thus answering the research question. Moustakas (1994) explains that using a systematic approach as this aided in providing detailed descriptions of the experiences in relation to two elements, “ – “what” the individuals have experienced and “how” they experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Throughout the analysis process the “what” and “how” of the experience played key roles in developing a descriptive narrative of the participants’ journey in concurrent teaching and higher education.

## **Ethical Issues**

Because qualitative research takes place within the lives of participants, in the real world, anonymity and protection of the participants was safe-guarded throughout the study. As Merriam (2009) states, and other scholars (Cresswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014) concur, in qualitative research trusted results in applied fields are paramount because practitioners intervene in the lives of others. Ethical standards were upheld throughout the study. Anonymity and privacy were carefully considered and highlighting data points in the

findings of the study were handled on an individual basis with each participant to ensure their privacy and an accurate depiction of their experiences.

Questionnaire responses, interview recordings, transcripts, and data cards, researcher journals, and all communications with participants were kept in password protected digital files or in locked storage cabinets. All communications via email in relation to this study were conducted through a secured email address. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study to identify participants and to accurately code their individual interviews and focus group dialogue. All correspondence, via email, verbal, or written, was kept confidential. All information related to the study and the upholding of ethical standards for participant privacy was disclosed to the University of New Orleans' Institutional Review Board upon submission of the I.R.B. Proposal prior to receiving university to permission to conduct this study.

### **Trustworthiness**

I realize that my own professional experiences and my personal background with education could have had bearing on my interpretation of data and the experiences of others. In my own teaching experience, I also completed a master's degree program at the University of New Orleans while teaching full time and worked toward my doctoral degree while maintaining a full teaching schedule and mentoring new teachers. I am well aware of the challenges and successes that I have experienced and because of my firsthand experience with concurrent teaching and education, I used a peer debriefer throughout the study. My peer debriefer was also an educator and was familiar with both primary education as well as adult education. Working with a debriefer provided ongoing opportunities for review and questioning about the study to ensure that the interpretation of experiences is valid and free of personal bias (Creswell, 2014).

## **Credibility**

Credibility relates to how believable the results of the research study are as well as the methods that are used to determine data validity through the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested techniques including prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking to ensure credibility of the study results. By starting with a group of participants that are informed in the field of education and research due to their experiences in higher education, participants were more likely to be comfortable in one-on-one interview sessions relating to topics about careers and education. Trust and comfort was important in order to develop and maintain a professional relationship thus providing participants' input and opinions about interview locations and comfortable environments to discuss their experiences. Regular communication and multiple in-person opportunities for discussion also aided in building rapport for open discussion.

I utilized a peer debriefer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as previously mentioned, to ensure that any bias be lessened from my interpretation of the data. By using a peer debriefer who has experience with both teaching and higher education, but no association with the research study, this person was able to pose questions about interpretations and my potential biases to ensure that the participants' experiences were being depicted free of my own input on their thoughts. Meetings with the peer debriefer took place throughout the research time frame. All meetings were documented with records taken for reference at a later time if necessary.

## **Triangulation**

Triangulation refers to utilizing more than one data collection mode (initial informative questionnaire, interviews, focus group) in order to confirm information provided by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). As Creswell (2014) also discloses,



triangulation involves examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes (p.201). To ensure credibility, I used triangulation of data from demographic questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and notations in my researcher journal to enhance the development of categories and themes across participant experiences within the study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to “whether the conclusions of a study... have any larger import. Are they transferable to other contexts?” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 314). The ability to establish transferability within the study, as suggested by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014), is often the responsibility of the reader. However, being able to generalize the findings and conclusions to another population or context can be done so with careful interpretation through the use of thick descriptions and descriptive characteristics in identifying participants, settings, and other aspects of methodology.

### **Dependability**

To address the quality and integrity of a study, dependability and reliability ensure that the study is consistent and stable over time (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Dependability relates to clear research questions and that the methods of data collection and analysis are reasonable throughout the study and support the needs of the research. An external auditor, who was not otherwise involved with the study, provided quality checks on the processes and progress of the study to ensure that the findings reported were supported by the data collection and analysis. This also confirmed that although differentiation in individual interviews with participants does not interfere with the coding and that coding agrees with the data. The auditor

also understood that the researcher's role and biases were adequately disclosed and accounted for within the research study.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the study's general methods and procedures are described explicitly in detail (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). An audit trail was kept of all data, notations and information obtained during the study including the researcher journal, completed initial questionnaires, and digital and physical copies of the interview and focus group transcriptions. This information and all other documents related to the study were available to the peer debriefer and external auditor to ensure the sequence of the study was followed and is free of personal researcher bias.

### **Autobiographical Disclosure**

The lack of research surrounding teacher degree-seekers and my own experiences as a lifelong learner led me to learn more about the lived-experiences of teachers. Teachers can be described as having two full time jobs: one all day long and one into the night hours. As a teacher-scholar I am attending classes, conducting research, piloting educational concepts in my own classroom and studying educational theory. Days are long, nights do not end. But becoming a well-rounded educator has always been the driving force for me to continue my education. With my own personal experiences behind me, I sought to understand the experiences of other teachers who have traveled different paths to become the scholars they are today.

My own experiences, in all aspects of my life have led me to develop the beliefs and understandings of education through my own struggles and challenges. As a white, female, only-girl-child to a middle class yet uneducated family, I have always had a very different connection to education than those around me. Growing up, my family struggled to meet financial

responsibilities. We went without, we adapted, and we made do with whatever we could. My parents were hard workers who instilled in me that only I could change my situation, and through my education, I have. However, my current educational experience is very different than those in the past. In elementary, middle, and high school, schooling came naturally to me. I excelled and was rarely challenged. I graduated from high school and began my collegiate career having never felt the sense of defeat, or struggle with my own learning. That trend continued through my undergraduate degree program and most of my master's degree program, also. That is when things became more challenging. By this time, I was teaching in a low-income school where the student population was vastly different than the middle-class neighborhood public school that I had attended myself.

My first (and still I say, my best) teaching experience was spent in classrooms where I, the young, white, female teacher, was the minority. I was open to learning about their lives, their cultures, and the way they saw the world. In their own way, they did the same with me. I watched my students, learn to problem solve, communicate, and grow as people. Together we talked about tough subjects: incarceration, death, broken families, economic struggle, neighborhood violence. Difficult discussions not only brought us together as a class but it also allowed me into their lives. It was never the intention to discuss these topics with my students over the years but it was real and true stories that many of my students saw in the media, in the neighborhoods they lived in, and for some, in their immediate families. Being an active adult in their education afforded me that opportunity and it was one that I didn't take lightly. Through difficult discussions, I encouraged my students to challenge themselves, to reach for big goals, and to imagine their own success beyond what was ever-present in our community. We

discussed high school and college, and even though my students were in the very early stages of elementary school, we discussed education and how important it is to never stop learning.

Higher education has been an essential part of my adult life. I have spent my entire teaching career as a student engaging in continuing studies to grow as an educator and professional. My continuous studies provided opportunities for growth and change as a professional and have also allowed me to share my education and experiences with many people, from all educational backgrounds. I hold education in high regard, as both the educator and the student. My concurrent pursuit of advanced degrees and classroom teaching has afforded me experiences that I never anticipated. I have watched new teachers come and go because of the struggles in their own classrooms just as I have watched students in my university courses do the same for various personal and professional reasons. With each phase in my education and my career, I have gained a deeper respect for those who have been able to stick with it, achieve and cultivate the minds that they work with every day. The determination I have for my own education encouraged me to delve into the experiences that others have and to explore how education influenced those experiences.

My curiosity and determination have been my biggest motivators for conducting this study. As Creswell (2014) describes, “social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 8). The social constructivist perspective was developed from Berger and Luekmann’s (1967) research. Many researchers have continued to summarize social constructivism over the last fifty years (Cresswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln et. al, 2011; Mertens; 2010; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). In my research, I relied greatly on the participant’s views of their situations and through open-ended questions, participants told their stories to construct meaning for their experiences.

Creswell (2014) states that the meanings of these experiences are “not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others... and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (p. 8). Through this phenomenological study, I used the participants’ views of their experiences as teachers pursuing higher education to construct understanding of adult learning experiences within the educational profession.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the researcher’s positionality and methodological decision making that was used to collect data and produce findings. The findings provided a vivid depiction of the experiences teacher-scholars encountered during their concurrent teaching and coursework. The following chapter outlines, in detail, the results based on analysis of first-hand accounts of the participants in the study.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to examine the lived experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursued graduate studies while teaching and to understand how adult learning provides opportunities for personal growth and the development of professional goals. Phenomenology is “a study of people’s conscious experience of their life-world, that is, their everyday life” (Merriam S. B., 2009, p. 25). A phenomenological approach was used to develop an understanding of the experiences of teachers who concurrently pursued higher education. This chapter was designed to narrate and tell the participants’ stories collected through individual questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. The themes and the supporting data presented across participants are related to various stages in their teacher-scholar experience and tell the participants’ stories through their own words.

#### **Coding, Categories, and Themes**

Phenomenological research is the exploration of a phenomenon within a group of people and distillation of the data in order to illuminate the essence of their experiences. In this research, the eleven participants, who all concurrently attended graduate school and maintained a full-time teaching position, engaged in individual interviews discussing their experiences in a semi-chronological order. Interviews focused on their programs, life events, motivations, support systems, points of reflection, connections from learning to their career, and how their lives and careers were changed as a result of their experiences. Eleven participants engaged in face-to-face interviews. Eight of the eleven participated in in-person focus groups. The focus group discussions expanded on the topic of how reflection is present in teaching practices and

experiences. Teacher-scholar participants shared their own experiences making connections to how David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015) fits their personal beliefs on learning and reflection as seen through their own experiences. Experiences shared through the focus group discussions echoed experiences and connections made through the interview process and served as a point of member checking for participants to further express their experiences with others. The data from these face-to-face meetings were individually coded then grouped into larger, broad categories. Those categories were then combined to develop themes that represent the data from all participant stories to ensure authentic depictions of teacher-scholar experiences.

### **Coding**

A list of over 200 individual codes were identified after multiple readings of the thirteen transcriptions. The majority of these codes occurred repeatedly throughout the data and combined represented nearly 700 instances of coding in participant and focus group transcripts. Among those individual codes that were derived from the participant data, the most commonly occurring codes were self-improvement, self-motivated, marketability, changing life's schedule/scheduling, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, being a "weekend warrior," and having a supportive grade level or team. These codes represent the most discussed topics with 10-15 instances coded across the thirteen transcripts. Lesser occurring codes included lifelong learning, skill development, having a why not attitude, loss of social life, organization, stress, developing and enhancing the teacher toolbox, seeking a career change, having a spouse who did not understand the lifestyle, having a supportive spouse, prioritizing, experiencing burnout, support from parents and family, time management, balancing responsibilities and course load, control, breaking the "blue collar cycle," motivation from family, support at the workplace, and many more, each being referenced between five to nine times across all data sets.

Codes related to the experience yet referenced fewer times across transcriptions were then categorized and grouped together and used to develop themes that encompassed the experiences of the participants in a holistic view. Examples of lesser referenced codes include having a different lifestyle than peers, learning did not make sense until working in the field, experiencing an absence of family support, gaining independence, having doubters or nay-sayers, age as a hold-back for advancement, feeling selfish about decision-making, and providing experiential learning for our students.

### **Categorization of the Data**

Data categorization involved using the codes to identify broad topics related to various aspects of the teacher-scholar experiences across participant interviews. After categorization of all data, twenty categories emerged representing common topics represented in the data from all eleven participants. Categories varied from learner expectations and the journey back into the collegiate classroom to challenges learners faced, what they were seeking as a result of their education, what life was like and any major challenges or road blocks they encountered. All participants discussed their personal motivations, motivations from other family members, colleagues and friends, as well as the support they needed along the way. The last several categories discussed the feelings of success once the degree program was completed, learner reflections on experiences while being a teacher-scholar, and what may or may not be preventing these teachers from moving on from their teaching positions to seek the next phase in their careers. Focus group data was consistent with individual interview findings and supported course to classroom connections and the role of reflection in teacher-scholar education and career success. These categories were identified across all participant accounts to ensure that the data was representative of all of the participants' experiences as teacher-scholars.



## Themes

After coding and then categorizing the data, categories were grouped together to form themes that represent key elements in the teacher-scholar experience. Seven themes emerged from the data and each showing what led to success in the master's degree programs. These themes and the experiences that prompted discussion created a snapshot of the teacher-scholar experience as seen through the eyes of the eleven participants.

1. "If I don't do it now, I'm never going to do it!" (Stephen, 2018)

Teacher-scholars return to higher education for various reasons including seeking to improve their teaching practices, continuing formal education through the next logical step, and developing greater marketability for future career advancement and success.

2. "I have very high expectations for myself ... I really try to balance everything."

(Shantell, 2017) Teacher-scholars experienced a vast array of emotions, challenges, successes and setbacks during the period of time when they were concurrently teaching and taking advanced degree courses.

3. "I could go make more money doing something else but I don't want to...

I could go to school for the rest of my life and be happy." (Patrick, 2017)

Teacher-scholars' motivation to be successful in their careers and education stemmed from intrinsic desires for self-directed learning and extrinsic motivators to create a better life for themselves, their families, and their students.

4. "What a blessing it was for me to have a great support system!" (Sydney, 2017)

Teacher-scholars found necessary and influential emotional and educational support in their family and friends, university professors and program mentors, and other teachers and administrators at their school sites.

5. “I feel like I am a reflective person...it kind of forced me to really sit down and think about things.” (Jennifer, 2017) Teacher-scholars used reflection as a tool for improving and assessing their professional practice as well as an avenue to reinforce decision-making in both their personal and professional lives.
6. “The main things you should know for teaching you don’t learn until you start doing it.” (Stephen, 2018) Teacher-scholars’ master’s program coursework provided concrete learning experiences that impacted their success as teachers and helped to develop their professional qualities that would aid in career advancement after program completion.
7. “It validated the feeling that I had that I’m an educated person and I’m moving forward in life.” (Tony, 2017) – Teacher-scholars’ educational journeys provided experiences, opportunities, and increased awareness of the many career possibilities available to educators who hold a master’s degree. As a result, teacher-scholars felt they had increased their own marketability and had varied career advancement opportunities as a result of successfully completing their master’s degree programs.

These themes represent the essence of what the participants experienced over the course of their degree programs, most programs ranging between two to three years. The seven teacher-scholar experience themes will be outlined in the following section with supporting data from teacher interviews and focus group discussions. Data will be told across participant experiences from start of their programs through completion in a semi-chronological order.

### **Theme 1: “If I don’t do it now, I’m never going to do it!”**

This first theme represents the thought processes behind the teacher-scholars’ decisions to advance their education in order to make personal and professional changes in their lives. Stephen’s quote, “If I don’t do it now, I’m never going to do it,” summed up how many of the participants felt in that their degree programs were necessary at that point in their lives for various reasons. While some participants cited returning to school to become a better educator, others were seeking education to help develop marketability for career changes. Others were more focused on preparing for a successful financial future. All participants expressed that timing played a huge role in determining when they would reenter the classroom as a higher education student.

#### **Becoming a Better Educator**

Teachers have a demanding job that often extends into nights and weekends spent analyzing student achievement data and reflecting on teaching practices for every lesson. Several of the participants expressed a desire to better themselves as teachers and to learn new information to put in their “teacher toolbox.” Patrick, a fourth-grade English Language Arts teacher, entered an educational leadership program with hopes of improving his abilities as a leader. He explained, “Leadership is one thing that I’ve always struggled with... I looked at this opportunity [to get a master’s degree] as a way to self-improve... I really feel like I wanted to step that up” (Patrick, 2017). Patrick was not the only participant who identified a specific weakness in his own abilities leading him back into the classroom. Karen, a veteran teacher of 20+ years also realized a change was necessary. After teaching for twenty years, her school district offered an incentive program for teachers who went back to school to obtain degrees and certifications in high-need areas. At the time, Karen was teaching second grade and found herself

struggling with how to reach students and improve their reading skills. Her master's degree program was designed to help her accomplish her own goals while obtaining the reading specialist's add-on certification that her district was seeking. Karen connected her continuing education to her own needs as a child, "I was always interested in teaching reading... although it was one of my weak areas as a child. Going through my graduate courses and learning all of the various strategies ... It really impacted my instruction in the classroom" (Karen, 2018). By connecting Karen's needs as a child to her areas of growth in the classroom as the teacher, she was able to harness her learning in such a way that it changed the way she approached teaching reading.

Bryan, a middle and high school English teacher, also experienced many challenges in the classroom leading him to enroll in a master's degree program. After taking an extended break after high school, Bryan got his undergraduate degree in History and went to South Korea to teach English. He found himself in love with the classroom but was uncertified and untrained to teach in the United States. After coming home, he immediately enrolled in a master's degree program to earn his certification and learn how to be an effective teacher in the U.S. He recalled the moment he realized that his calling was in education, "When I went to Korea to teach, I had never been a teacher before...I loved it. It was a struggle at first, but I knew that I found something I really wanted to do... finally a career path that suited me" (Bryan, 2017). Bryan moved quickly through his program to obtain his full certification as soon as possible. He used that time to immerse himself in learning the components to being a successful teacher.

Renee, much like Karen, Patrick, and Bryan, had found a home in education but still felt there was more for her to learn in order to "better her craft" as she put it. Already a 5th grade math teacher, Renee's desire to engage in continued education stemmed from her childhood

where she intended to break the mold as a first-generation college graduate and create a better life for herself than she had experienced in the past. Renee fondly discussed her decision-making, “I considered myself a good math teacher but I wanted to be a great math teacher... I was simply thinking an advanced degree would help me better service my students” (Renee, 2017). Renee’s desire to improve her teaching practices stemmed from curiosity and her aim for “always wanting to try something new.” This led to many days and nights spent reflecting on the new things she had learned and how those new strategies were impacting her students’ learning.

### **The Next Step: Developing Marketability**

Being an educator involves continued learning for both the teacher and the students and recognizing when a change must be made in order to sustain success. For some, making career decisions, such as returning to school for an advanced degree, can provide additional opportunities for career development. Several participants in this study referenced higher education as a means to develop their personal marketability in the education field. At the time of the data collection, two of the eleven participants had already moved into school leadership roles, two were working in teacher support roles, and seven participants remained in the classroom. Of the seven classroom teachers, three were eagerly awaiting immediate opportunities to move into school administration, two would seek teacher support roles only if they were at the same school where they presently teach, and two had no intentions of leaving the classroom in the immediate future.

Kristine, a second-grade teacher at the time, began her master’s degree program online after teaching for a few years. After completing her undergraduate degree, she moved 1,500 miles away from her family and friends to teach in the New Orleans area. She discussed how her thought process for beginning a master’s program online:

I knew I wanted to go back to school to get my master's to have a higher degree that may someday allow me to have more opportunities to further my career in education... I thought having a few years of teaching experience under my belt would give me a better shot at being successful in my master's degree program after gaining some knowledge and experience about actual life in the classroom. (Kristine, 2017)

Shantell, much like Kristine, sought a master's degree as a way to prolong her career in education:

I looked at my classroom and realized I could not stay in the classroom for another twenty to thirty years. I needed an avenue to be able to still work with children but not in the classroom setting. I just really wanted the fallback plan. (Shantell, 2017)

With no definitive career goal in mind, Shantell began her master's degree in 2015. Her degree, focusing on reading and literacy, would allow her to dabble in teaching situations beyond her first and second grade classrooms as well as provide her with the coursework to obtain the reading specialist's add-on certification in the process of degree completion.

Many of the participants in this research study referenced their own needs for continuing education and embracing lifelong learning. Jennifer expressed a passion for learning that pushed her into her first master's degree program simply because she had not yet met the qualifications for the degree program she really wanted. As a brand-new teacher Jennifer wanted to build her resume to be marketable in her future. She wanted educational and teaching experience that would open doors for her later in her career. She explained her love of the classroom, "I kind of enjoy going to school... At the time I felt like I could have been a student forever... It was important to go and to learn and to see what it (a master's degree in Curriculum) was all about" (Jennifer, 2017). After completing her undergraduate degree and beginning her teaching career,

Jennifer felt that “it was really weird not being in school.” She researched degree programs and career outlook and determined that she ultimately wanted a degree in educational administration however her university of choice would not admit students to that program without a minimum of three years teaching experience. She recalled her plan for obtaining that degree:

... I’ll just do this master’s (curriculum & instruction) while I’m waiting to do my second master’s... It wasn’t something specific. I didn’t even have a plan for either of those degrees but I just felt like I had the opportunity. (Jennifer, 2017)

Jennifer began her second master’s degree in educational leadership just after completing her first one. She recalls using most of what she learned in both programs to help her as a teacher, still very early in her career, “I was listening to how other people were doing things and I was able to take that and use it in my classroom.” Having experienced master’s degrees in both curriculum and educational leadership would prove to be valuable knowledge for Jennifer’s future in education.

Tony, much like Bryan, also entered teaching on a Practitioner’s License after trying to decide what to do with his undergraduate degree in French. Tony, a self-proclaimed lover of languages, decided that in order to put his French degree to good use, he must seek certification to teach French in the school setting. He researched certification programs and found that none targeted French so he was thrust into a program to get a basic certification before applying for an add-on certification to teach a foreign language. Tony found an alternative certification program that would allow him to obtain his teaching certificate quickly. Tony was quickly hired on a Practitioner’s License after having only six weeks of training. As a brand-new teacher, learning about teaching was on the forefront of his mind so he concurrently enrolled in a master’s degree program in Elementary Education to add to his knowledge base and experience in education. “It

was the desire to have an advanced degree. I felt like if I wanted to do something different later, I'd have a master's degree. It just makes me more marketable," he recalled. Knowing he had entered the field of education to eventually move into a classroom teaching something he was so passionate about, French, helped motivate Tony to move through the programs quickly in order to find what he thought would be his perfect place in education.

### **Prepping for a Successful Future**

For Sydney, a veteran teacher and newly divorced mother of two, her journey to higher education was more than just an interest in learning; it was a necessity to further her career and her finances to provide for her growing family. With her first grandson on the way and her son still in middle school, Sydney had no choice but to buckle down and return to the collegiate classroom to prepare herself for a future in educational leadership. Earning her master's degree would not only provide her marketability as a teacher but would also give her the credentials to move into an administrative role. With that role came the salary increase that she would need to support her family on her own which helped solidify her decision to return to school when she did:

... having my master's degree and additional options on where I might work and what I might be able to do was motivation for me to go back. I did not choose to return to school at the most difficult time in my adult life. Returning chose me. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney's experience as a teacher and mentor to student teachers and first-year teachers helped make her decision to seek educational administration an obvious choice. She expressed a love of teaching children that was equal to the joy she felt when given the opportunity to teach, train, and lead other adults. She harnessed her love of teaching to help guide her in developing her skills as a leader. She hoped that through her challenges and adversities that she would be able to



help the next generation of teachers face the challenges that are “inhibiting teachers from remaining in the profession for the length of time that they had in the past.”

While Sydney’s educational journey started on the heels of adversity, Gabby’s was driven by the prospect of new beginnings. She was preparing to move out of state with her boyfriend of ten years yet the only thing in her way was her career. She had just graduated from her undergraduate program and had gotten a job as a first-grade teacher. Before the school year began, she started looking into teacher certification outside of the state of Louisiana, in preparation for a big move. After researching various states and looking into teacher certification in the northeast where she anticipated moving, Gabby realized that in order to teach out of state, it was in her best interest to pursue a master’s degree before moving.

With no specific career goal in mind, she enrolled in a local master’s program, “I had no intention to ever become an administrator. I just needed the degree so I could teach out of state because they required an undergraduate, a master’s, and the SLLA [School Leaders Licensure Assessment] scores” (Gabby, 2018). Gabby enrolled and began taking courses during her first semester of teaching. At that time, it was imperative to get the degree program started so that she would be prepared to jump into a successful career when she moved. To her surprise, her relationship ended during her second semester of graduate school. She chose to stick with the program and graduate although she felt strongly that she started the program with only the intentions of moving out of state. “I intended on staying in the program because I’m not a quitter. I ended up really enjoying it and became very interested in becoming an administrator one day,” she recalled. With her relationship over and her budding teaching career in full-swing, Gabby set out to build a life of her own, newly single and tackling the biggest challenge of her life – concurrent teaching and learning. Unlike all other participants, Gabby experienced doubters –

friends, family, and even university professors that were unsure if she could manage such a hectic lifestyle. She was advised by her university professors to wait to return to school, to not immediately begin her program until she had taught for a while. The newfound career possibilities became a strong motivation to continue and excel in her program. Not only did she develop marketability for her future in education but also strived to prove naysayers wrong by showing them that she could handle challenges successfully showing how determination and perseverance to succeed outweigh any negative outlooks.

### **Timing Is Everything**

Each of the participants had their own reasons for returning to the collegiate classroom when they did in their careers. While some decided to do so because of their family situations, others for career advancement, and others simply because they loved learning, all participants seemed to have had time on their side. That point in their life was the right time for each of them to be going back to school.

Gabby expressed that time was on her side as she had just graduated college and her university offered half-priced tuition for classroom teachers. Still living with her parents, Gabby said “it just played out for me to go right away” and was able to go to school while saving money to buy a house after she graduated. Karen also received financial assistance due to timing. Her school district was offering tuition assistance for teachers pursuing high-need certifications and at the time, her family was stable, her children were older and she was able to focus her attention on her classroom and her learning rather than young children. Karen mentioned that part of her wishes she had done a master’s degree program earlier in her career. Karen finished her master’s degree in 2012 and recalled her beliefs about timing, “I am a woman of faith and believe everything happens when it’s supposed to happen.” She also mentioned, however, that she

completed an additional certification in educational leadership in May of 2017, and she sometimes imagines how her career may be different had she done her master's degree earlier in her career rather than after 20 years of teaching, and perhaps in Educational Leadership rather than curriculum. She noted that at 56-years-old, she's 25 years into her career and looking at retirement. Had she tackled higher education earlier in her teaching years, her career may be quite different than it is today. Regardless, Karen is thankful for the opportunities that her district has provided her and is confident that everything in her career past has happened how and when it was intended to happen.

Like Karen, Patrick's school district also afforded him an opportunity to pursue his master's degree. Although timing was not perfect for Patrick, with a toddler son and a daughter on the way, he and his wife, who is also a teacher, felt that it was not an opportunity that he should pass up. A local university was offering a satellite program in their small town, cutting out an hour commute to the university for classes. This in-person program option put him in a cohort of 15 teachers which became a built-in support system as he navigated teaching, mentoring, learning, and still being present in the lives of his young children.

For Stephen, Shantell, and Kristine, time was running out. They each felt that they had to go back to school at that time, otherwise the opportunity may pass them by. After gaining teaching experience, they were at a point in their lives where they felt if they had not gone to complete their master's degrees, they may never do it. Stephen felt as if time was of the essence. Although he had been teaching for many years, he was ready for a change and thought school administration was in his future. He recalled feeling that if didn't do it right then, then he would never do it. He explained, "I felt that I was moving in a different direction, nothing thinking I'd

remain in the classroom for much longer.” He enrolled in a master’s degree program at a local university that was convenient to fit in to his hectic teaching schedule.

Similarly, Tony and Bryan were at a turning point in their lives, realizing that teaching was their passion and began teaching on Practitioner’s Licenses while working towards certification and then concurrently enrolled in master’s degree programs to make up for time they had lost while trying to figure out their next career moves. For Sydney, much like Tony and Bryan, there was no time like the present to begin the master’s degree program. After an abrupt end to a 15-year marriage, Sydney found herself a single mother now forced to continue raising her family on her own. “Juggling work, school, and my family proved to be quite a challenge, as I could never allow one or the other to fall by the wayside,” she explained. She was diligent in managing her time to ensure that although this opportunity did not come at the perfect time in her life, she made the best of it and thrived from the experience.

For Jennifer and Renee returning to school was more of a why not decision as opposed to a decision based on timing or educational need. Both women were teaching already and felt as if they had more to learn. For Jennifer, learning came naturally and she felt out of place by not being in school herself. Her love of learning drove her to jump right back in the classroom, even as a new teacher. “I’m fortunate enough to have the resources to continue it (her education) for myself. I just feel like you have to be open to it and you have to constantly be receptive to what other people are offering,” she explained. “Education is something that no one is going to take from you.” Jennifer enjoys being a student and leading a professional life so much that she is still not finished her education and is now working towards a doctoral degree.

Renee also felt that she was at a why not point in her education. She was working in a school that she loved, in a position that she truly enjoyed however she wanted to become better. She wanted to learn more to help her students tackle the challenges that were being brought to them through the introduction of the Common Core curriculum standards. She recalled thinking about doing an online master's program, "I had been going to school my whole life. I was pretty accustomed to my principal and the school. I really didn't have any other life changing events happening so I sort of thought, why not." The online program fit right in with Renee's lifestyle and afforded her the learning she wanted without interrupting the social life she enjoyed.

### **Bringing It All Together: Why Me? Why Now?**

Theme one represented the initial thought-processing phase of returning to school. Teacher-scholars expressed how they determined when and how they would obtain their master's degrees. While some acknowledge that higher education is not the only way for educators to advance in their field, obtaining an advanced degree was the chosen method for the teacher-scholars to work towards their personal and professional goals. The findings from this data suggests that teacher-scholars returned to higher education for various reasons because they were looking to make changes in their careers in the future. For some teacher-scholars it was to improve their instructional practices, for others to develop leadership qualities and certifications to move into administrative roles. For all participants, the pursuit of their master's degree provided increased marketability to move beyond the classroom into teacher support roles when the opportunity presented itself.

## **Theme 2: “I have very high expectations for myself ... I really try to balance everything.”**

After choosing the right time and the perfect program, the challenge of seeking success through academic advancement began. While the eleven participants anticipated what programs would be like, tackling life and responsibilities aside from their career and their education proved to be challenging. All participants persisted and succeeded but not without struggle or experiencing burnout. Shantell’s quote, “I have very high expectations for myself... I really try to balance everything,” captures the self-directedness of the teacher-scholars as well as their willingness to take on numerous responsibilities at once. The following sections detail their experiences on the long and bumpy road to success as they navigated their mindset for achieving their educational goals, strategic ways they managed the workload, and the challenges teacher-scholars faced on the way to program completion.

### **Understanding the Mindset of Teacher-Scholars**

A glimpse into the mindset of the teacher-scholars is necessary in order fully understand their experiences. Participant data provided an eye-opening account of how high expectations, the yearning for professional growth, and a passion for lifelong learning set the eleven teacher-scholars up for success even though challenges were inevitable. Participants discussed how their self-directed, reflective personalities aided them to continue learning at every opportunity.

**High expectations.** Several participants expressed that the expectations they had set for themselves were very high. No matter the challenge they faced, they persevered and completed tasks to the best of their abilities. Stephen and Shantell were direct when asked about their expectations in the master’s programs. Both remarked that expectations of themselves were very high. Stephen discussed expectations of himself, “High, in that I always wanted to find out everything that I could about just about anything, especially if something interested me.”

Shantell's remarks mirrored Stephen's, "I have very high expectations for myself and my husband thinks they're too high...I often push myself too hard," she explained. Stephen shared his love of reading non-fiction and how he felt immersed in his learning through the research courses. Although they were not his favorite, they piqued his interest by providing an avenue that allowed him to learn more and more through reading. "I just wanted to know more... I like doing research. And I love reading non-fiction." Stephen's high expectations in learning led him to develop a continued sense of interest in research, so much that he said, "basically I just love doing research now... if I could be a research person after I retire, I would love to do that!"

Like Stephen, Karen also found a strong connection to her coursework, which helped her to uphold the high expectations she had for herself. As an older student, Karen had been out of the collegiate classroom for many years and discussed her expectations in terms of what she would need to do in order to be successful, "I expected more independence, to do more research, more text reading... I expected to broaden my vocabulary, defining more terms, more lecturing." Karen learned early on in her program that her expectations were right on target with what she would be doing and very quickly, she rediscovered her love for being a student. "The classes just really piqued my interest," she said.

Tony also expressed his expectations in terms of what he would be doing and also what he would be giving up. Before committing to start his master's degree, he came to terms with the sacrifices he would have to make in his personal life in order to make time for assignments, "I knew I would have to give some things up... I think my big expectation was that papers take a long time to write." He justified his sacrifices and decisions though by sharing that the online aspect of his master's degree program made him feel like he would be able to handle it.

As a reflective educator, Sydney considered many factors that would impact her success in her master's program. With high standards for herself and her students, she knew that she would have to work diligently to accomplish tasks to her rigorous standards. She expected the same amount of commitment from her university:

My expectations were great... with the significant amount of effort and work that I put into the requirements I had a great expectation from the institution I chose and trusted with this important career-changing opportunity. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney was highly committed to earning her degree after teaching in the field for several years and her high expectations were evident, not only for her own success, but also of the people who were in charge of providing her instruction, support, and experience.

**Continuing education helped make me better.** Tony, aside from his expectations of sacrifices for success, discussed his expectations of himself through defining his personality and commitment to learning, "I feel pretty self-sufficient when it comes to learning in general. I knew that whatever I was going to take on that I'd be able to handle it... I'm persistent" (Tony, 2017). Tony's persistence and his expectations of himself helped to push him through some challenging times as a new teacher.

Kristine also experienced challenges as a new teacher, and with only a few years of experience, she entered her master's program with the expectations that it would help her to become better and to equip her with new strategies to reach her children. "I expected to gain knowledge that would help make me a better teacher," she said. Kristine's determination to better herself through an advanced degree allowed her see learning in a new light and helped teach her third graders through the use of technology.



Gabby, like Kristine and Tony, was also a new teacher looking to improve her knowledge base over the course of her studies. Although her decision to start the program was not an academically driven one, she was resourceful with her decision and chose a degree path that would allow her opportunities later in her career. When asked about her expectations, she immediately discussed how she perceived herself as reflective and expected that she would reflect constantly on her learning in order to improve as a professional. She explained how she looks at any opportunities in her life, “I reflect a lot, and I always look at what I can do better. Or what I should have done better” (Gabby, 2018).

Gabby, Kristine, and Tony expressed a “can do, don’t quit” attitude throughout their interviews. It was clear that although they had individually faced challenges early in their teaching careers, it did not hinder their expectations for success in their programs.

**You can never stop learning.** While all participants expressed, in some way, that they had high expectations for themselves, Sydney, Bryan, Jennifer, Patrick, and Renee discussed how learning is a necessary component in their lives, not only professionally, but also as a way of life. Whether continuing to improve themselves as professionals, advancing in their careers, or proving for their family, learning and growing as an adult is a vital part of stability in their adult lives.

Jennifer, Bryan, Patrick, and Renee agree that if you are not learning, you are not advancing. Like the others, they are strong supporters of lifelong learning and believe that continuing education is crucial to an educator’s success. Jennifer discussed her necessity of learning, “It’s important to me to continue to improve my education... just open-minded to always learning from what is going on around you” (Jennifer, 2017). Bryan shared a similar thought regarding expectations of his own learning, “I need constant and steady improvement, I

hate wasted time.” The importance of continuing his education drives Bryan to learn and apply new experiences to his daily life and teaching practice, “I see my learning as immediately beneficial. If it’s not beneficial for me now and in my future, and beneficial to the people around me, I prefer to not be associated.” In an effort to “make up for lost time” Bryan seizes every opportunity to learn from those around him in order to make the best of every situation.

Patrick was very concise with his explanation of his expectations, “Lifelong learning is key providential in my life. Every day I try to learn something new. I find that I learn both best through reading and doing.” Both Patrick and Bryan appreciate continued education but saw intentional learning as needing to be applicable in order to be beneficial. They both shared a distaste for wasted time and agreed that when you are intended to be learning something, the knowledge should be new and influential to your personal needs.

Renee describes her expectations of learning as “taking in and processing new information all the time.” As a self-proclaimed lifelong learner, he believes that all opportunities to observe, discuss, and interact with other educators help her to learn and grow as a professional. Her vision of learning is not limited to the collegiate classroom just as her learning is not defined by education, “We learn every day and we use what we’ve learned to determine how we will live our lives and the decisions we’ll make.” Learning, from all aspects of Renee’s life, is the key to her success and the driving force behind her passion to be an effective, dynamic educator.

### **Tackling the Workload**

Participants spent a great deal of time sharing how they fit their graduate studies into their already hectic lives. Throughout the data from all eleven participants many similarities were found highlighting the methods they used to staying on track towards degree completion all

while ensuring they were still successful as classroom teachers. Data reflected that all participants recognized their need for prioritizing their to-do lists and organizing their lives through specific time management routines, however the time aspect varied depending on the responsibilities of the individual teacher-scholar.

**My whole life changed.** When life handed some of the participants an opportunity or provided a sound reason to make a life-changing career decision, going to classes after teaching all day was not the only thing that changed. For Gabby, Tony, Patrick, Sydney, and Bryan, adding coursework to their already full plate was sometimes more than they anticipated.

Gabby felt like it was “now or never” while still living with her parents during graduate school. Pursuing her master’s degree would open doors for certification outside the state of Louisiana. As a brand-new teacher however, she realized that she was taking on more than just attending classes a few nights a week. She found herself scheduling every aspect of her life. She expressed her frustration with the lack of time she had to spend with her loved ones,

I’d be rushing home from work just to go straight to class. I wouldn’t eat dinner until like, 8 or 9 o’clock on those nights. It was very stressful... Once my original relationship going in, failed, I wasn’t able to maintain any other relationship with significant others... it was very hard not having a social life. (Gabby, 2018)

The two years that Gabby spent in graduate school were made up of long days and nights, missed outings with friends and family, and finding creative ways to keep her motivation. Like other participants, Gabby expressed that while she was at work, she was fully focused on her teaching and her class, however her time spent outside of her school day was devoted to her graduate school work. Scheduling time for her assignments and readings was challenging after the long hours spent at work and in class. Gabby reflected some on her planning, “I would try to

designate a certain day just to do all of my course work... it was just so much all of the time... I was always sitting in front of the computer” (Gabby, 2018). Gabby summed up her life at that time very concisely, “I honestly felt like I didn’t have a life outside of school and grad school.” After all her responsibilities were done each day, she withdrew, just wanting to be alone before beginning to work on her coursework once again.

Sydney, like Gabby, also felt that “juggling work and school was quite challenging.” Sydney recognized that her success as an educator could not be deterred by her pursuit of educational advancement, nor could her family responsibilities. She attributes her success to precise time management:

Time management played a huge role in my success of both teaching and learning concurrently. During the school day, I valued my planning time to plan, score, and organize myself for classroom instruction. During the school week I graded papers and prepared the necessities for my students, and on weekends and free time I submerged myself in my work for graduate school. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney’s time management skills were not solely devoted to her teaching and learning. She also meticulously managed her time when it came to her children, often allowing other family members to support her children so that she could complete her program expeditiously and be able to provide for her children most effectively, “I woke up early on Saturdays and either typed or read, for hours on end... I relied on my family to step in for me when I needed help. My support system was amazing” (Sydney, 2017).

Sydney’s dedication to her career and her future career development left her absent from family events, “During my journey, I missed out on a lot of really important events and quality time with my children, during a time when they may have needed me the most.” She also put her

personal life and social life on hold, stating that she “didn’t have time to attend to [her] needs, much less wants.” She chuckled as she recalled dating, “When I dated, those casual dates usually consisted of helping me study and making coffee.” Resilient, determined, and willing to sacrifice the present moment for a future of success, Sydney persevered through her program and bounced back. In the process, she changed the course of her future by giving herself the opportunity to advance from a classroom teacher to a school administrator.

Like Sydney, Patrick also had family responsibilities that had to be sacrificed in order for him to pursue his master’s degree. Determined to be with his family as much as possible, yet still maintain his teaching and course schedule, Patrick closely examined his responsibilities and made some challenging decisions about what could be sacrificed temporarily for him to pursue his degree. With a wife, a small child, another on the way, and a mortgage, the financial commitment to higher education weighed heavily on Patrick’s mind. Prior to starting his program, he tutored regularly bringing in additional income to help maintain his family’s quality of life. While working towards his degree, the most major life change was financial. He discussed the financial struggle:

I tutored pretty consistently before master’s, and I tutor pretty consistently now. But for those two and a half years, I didn’t, and so that put a financial strain on us for sure, because I was also paying for classes... I try to pull that in to help out but that was cut away. (Patrick, 2017)

In addition to the financial strain, in order to maintain presence in his children’s’ lives, he scheduled blocks of time to accomplish everything to ensure that his children did not feel the absence from their father that he had experienced during his early childhood.

Basically, I woke up every morning at 3:45. I would do school work, like grad school work from 3:45 to about 4:45. And then from 4:45 to about 5:45 or so I would grade papers or do my actual work. Then I'd get the kids up and roll with them. I'd teach all day then on Tuesday nights, every week, I'd go to class... (Patrick, 2017)

Long days at school coupled with long class nights and very early mornings left Patrick with little left to give yet he stayed committed to his success and building a better life for his family. Even after long work days, his children came first.

I would work and maybe have class, come home, then I would probably work for another hour after my kids went to bed. But first I would read to them and put them to sleep for 8:30 and work until at least 10:00. (Patrick, 2017)

Patrick expressed his feelings of always putting his family first many times during the interview but also proudly shared his recollection of his daughter's birth while he was in graduate school, "I didn't even miss a class. I had class on a Tuesday night and she was born on Wednesday. The next Tuesday, I was expected to be back there" (Patrick, 2017).

Although Patrick sacrificed financially during his graduate program, he and his wife refused to let their children know any different, "Probably one of the reasons I am a teacher today is because time with my kids is important to me beyond anything." Patrick recalls small fragments of time where he missed an opportunity with his kids, but he appreciates the opportunities that he now has to grow in his profession to build a better life for his young family.

Building a better life was part of the catalyst that led Bryan to educational advancement also. In order for Bryan to experience educational success, his life became regimented and structured based on to-do lists and goal accomplishment. Without a family to support him, or a companion in his personal life, his education consumed him. "During the week I was at work

until 8 o' clock at night. I come home and go to bed at 10... It took life away from me!" The stress of being a first-year teacher and graduate student was difficult for Bryan. He relied on his personal motivation and the encouragement from his work family to push through the long hours and unending work and preparation, "I had to prioritize what was more important... I made lists, always made lists. Always had to write things down. This needs to be done by then, it was always right in front of me on my desk" (Bryan, 2017).

In the process of losing his social and personal life to his education and career, Bryan realized that he was neglecting his friends and his most faithful companion, his dog, Lexi. The lack of support and having no outlet for his personal life left Bryan feeling depressed, "It just really affected me... I was working my but off, losing my life basically, my personal life, to try and better these kids... It stressed me out, big time" (Bryan, 2017). Although the realization of needing support and companionship did not come for Bryan until he was finished his master's degree program, looking back he sees that time in his life as his darkest days.

Like Bryan, Tony also experienced adversity, depression, and a loss of his personal life during the pursuit of his master's degree. In 2011, during his first year of teaching and his first year of graduate school, Tony and his wife welcomed a son. He quickly realized that he had more to handle than he had ever imagined. "Life was hectic. It was crazy because it was nonstop work." As a new teacher, Tony felt obligated to spend long hours planning and preparing for his classroom. He was often the first to arrive on campus and the last to leave. His long work hours began to put a strain on his marriage as his wife was taking on the roles of both mom and dad. Tony, still in the early stages of his career, still desired to control as much of the situation as he could, but then realized the errors of his ways:

Flexibility came with time, but at the beginning, I wasn't [flexible]. That was a huge stress. I had the master's degree going on at the same time... Many times, just because the actual work – schooling, teaching, was a priority, grades and things would get done last minute. (Tony, 2017)

At home, his life was regimented by trying to attend to his son's needs and filling in all other time with more work:

When I got home, probably about 7:00 p.m., I'd eat and take care of my son then put him to bed... I would be trying to do lesson plans and things like that. And while I would be doing lesson plans, or working on a paper, or something like that for my MAT program, my wife would be cooking or cleaning... She constantly asked why I had to sit in front of the computer for three or four hours. (Tony, 2017)

Tony's family saw his struggle and how he was losing himself along the way to educational success:

My parents didn't understand why I would be working until 10, 10:30 at night. They didn't understand why I would be taking Saturday and Sunday to work. It caused a lot of worry and concern on their part.

He also shared that although he did not lose friends over his education, relationships were strained due to Tony distancing himself from his friends in order to keep up with everything. Sydney, Bryan, and Tony remained focused on their education and did whatever possible to succeed, including taking time away from friends and family, and in the end, they emerged victorious in their endeavors, but not without challenge and struggle along the way.

**Weekend Warriors.** Teacher-scholars Jennifer, Karen, Shantell, and Kristine all shared a striking similarity to their plan for completing their master's degree programs. In order to



prevent their education from consuming their life and taking over every moment, they resolved to discipline themselves to ensure that work was completed during work hours and work days, and weekends would be devoted to their master's degree coursework. Although there were times when the two overlapped each other, this method of scheduling and discipline gave the women the opportunity for the best of both worlds as a teacher-scholar, with time to work and time for leisure when necessary.

Shantell worked hard to schedule her school work and her teaching work in such a way that she would still be able to do things with her family whenever possible. Shantell used her program's design to her advantage, scheduling work duties during the workweek and her graduate studies on the weekends when her assignments were due. She also chose to take only one course at a time to ensure she did not become overwhelmed or run out of time trying to accomplish many obligations at once.

Although she did everything she could to keep on top of things, there were times when she felt she had to prioritize work and school, "I put my kids (students) ahead of my graduate school work ... I also struggled with time for family and friends. And I couldn't give my husband the attention he wanted because I was always busy with something else," (Shantell, 2017). Shantell did not feel as though she lost her personal life as a result of her education but she did share some major changes that happened not long after she got married. She began to feel a bit of distance in her relationship with her mother due to the mounting obligations and responsibilities Shantell was facing as not only a teacher-scholar, but a newlywed as well, "My mom was so used to us going places together and doing things together but while I was taking my classes, I had to tell her no because I either had a spouse responsibility or a grad school responsibility" (Shantell, 2017).

As a newlywed, Shantell was also welcoming a new family into her life. With that new family became new obligations for family visits, events, and outings. She recalled struggling to organize her time and prioritize her tasks all while trying to please everyone. She shared the differences between her and her husband's families when it came to missing out on family events because of graduate school responsibilities.

On my side of the family, I did not (miss out on events). My mom will tell me that such and such is coming up on a specific date so I was able to plan around that ... However, for my husband's side of the family ... My husband will pop up and he'll say we have this happening this afternoon, or whenever and his family will often ask, where's Shantell? Why isn't she here? And he'll have to tell them that I am working. (Shantell, 2017)

She shared that instances like those made her thankful for her program design, where she could plan her work around the regular Wednesday/Sunday due dates.

Kristine also resolved to spend her weekends working to complete her graduate studies. She was determined to buckle down and complete her program quickly. When she began her master's degree she also moved to a new grade level and was taking in a lot of new information from multiple aspects in her life. She found scheduling and routine to be her saving grace during this time and focused herself to keeping to the routine. "That [the routine] helped me to not stress out as much, even though it was a very stressful time in my life." With typical teacher responsibilities mounting, Kristine felt overwhelmed at times having to add on readings and writing papers for her master's classes.

She found that her routines and scheduling were the keys to her success, along with finding time to relax every once in a while:

Keeping a schedule, knowing due dates, and not procrastinating on assignments helped me stay on the path of success... I would work on them a little each night. Weekends were really important to me for completing all of the tasks, and occasionally taking some time to relax.

Keeping to a routine helped Kristine to stay on track and keep focused on her work. When she found herself needing to take a class over the summer she learned to appreciate opportunities to take her learning on the go, often to her local library. "I found myself at the local library for hours... It was tough but I got a lot of work done." Her positive attitude kept her moving forward through the completion of her degree program.

Karen, like Kristine, also faced a grade level change during her graduate school program. After teaching second grade for many years, she found herself in unknown territories and feeling very overwhelmed in first grade. Although she loved her coursework, and her career, she felt that she was "wearing many hats" as she prepared for work and school each day.

I had to focus on where I was at the time. I had to put on the right hats. I'm at school teaching, I focused on school... And when it was time for me to go to school myself, I left work, went to school, and did what I had to do there. (Karen, 2018)

Karen's expressed that she did not feel as though her lifestyle was greatly impacted by her education. Her children were both older, in their teens and early twenties. She and her husband had been married for nearly 2 and were quite settled and content in their lives. Together they would prepare meals on the weekends to last throughout the week so that neither of them had to come home and cook after a long day away from home.

Like the others, Jennifer focused her weekends on her schoolwork also, yet shared that she had no life - by choice. She was dating, living with her brother, and devoted spare time to

work and school. She loved being in the classroom – both sides of it. Education was her passion whether giving or receiving the instruction. She felt that she was living a simple life, “At the time I wasn’t married. I didn’t have children. My life was not super busy. School took up plenty of time, typically on the weekends.” She recalled having to miss out on fun with friends and occasionally with family, but that did not bother her. She was more worried about rolling through her program.

Some classes took up less time than others... I tried to balance it within another class.

That way I wasn’t trying to overdo it. And I always took two classes a semester so that I could keep up with the program but not get too overwhelmed. (Jennifer, 2017)

Like many other participants have shared, Jennifer put herself on a routine. She talked about becoming “diligent and focused on making sure that work didn’t have to come home.” She explained, “I made sure all the kids’ – my students’ – stuff was graded and entered in the grade book before I left on Friday... I wasn’t taking home that work, and then trying to do school work on top of that” (Jennifer, 2017). Jennifer and her grade level team worked closely together to ensure that their planning and creation of tests and lessons was done at school, “I became really good at kind of making sure that things were done for work during the week, and then I could make sure that all of my schoolwork was done on the weekends.”

Spending the whole weekend working and studying is not an ideal plan for everyone pursuing higher education, but for these women, it proved to be the right choice for them and their family at that stage in their life. By dedicating a set time to work on their assignments as well as dedicating their week to their careers, these women were able to accomplish their goals as well as make time for friends and family and keep their classrooms running smoothly.

**It fit with my schedule.** Program selection and course scheduling were priorities for Stephen and Renee. As dedicated teachers, they did not want their pursuit of higher education to have any impact on their performance. Both chose programs that would fit in their lives rather than having their lives fit into a program. For Renee, the choice was an accelerated 18-month online degree program designed for professionals already working within their field. Renee was confident that she could work towards her master's degree without disruption to her work life or her social life. She explained how she worked her courses into her regular schedule:

I could literally complete the coursework any time of the night. I would go to bed at about 9 and wake up at 1 a.m., complete some work and then go back to bed... I had total control of when I completed assignments within the week. (Renee, 2017)

Another benefit she discussed about her online program was that all assignments and expectations were spelled out at the very beginning of the course. Armed with that information, she could pre-plan when and how she would complete them. She also shared that because her degree program was focused on mathematics education, most of the discussions and coursework were very closely related to what she was teaching and flowed right into her classroom, "It was actually beneficial because most of the discussions we had were related to classroom instruction. Classmates would share strategies and I was able to learn from people across the country and from all grade levels."

When it came to family obligations and time with friends, Renee rarely had to pass up opportunities with others. "Because it was all online, I was in control of when I worked for the most part," she explained further:

I was able to just do what was convenient for me... I would go to work and I was able to have happy hour three days a week... If I wanted to wake up at 1 a.m. to work on my

assignments, I could. ...It was just easier having it on demand. If I didn't feel like working on a Tuesday, I didn't... It just fit around my schedule. (Renee, 2017)

The ability to work on her own time and at her own pace gave Renee a great sense of ownership in her learning. She was in control and was able to adapt and apply her learning to her teaching situation at that moment. She expressed a sense of pride in having been able to complete her degree program on her own terms without it coming between her and her family or her and her job.

Similarly, Stephen also made some pre-planning decisions that allowed him to continue on his educational journey without interfering or impacting his personal time. After teaching for several years, Stephen thought he wanted to become an administrator and ultimately leave the classroom to lead a school. He expressed great enjoyment for learning and for being a student himself but also recognized that he did not want his life to stop because of his education. After having what he described as an "amazing experience as an undergraduate," he chose to return to his alma mater to pursue his master's degree, "I was familiar with the university, and I still liked it, and I still do!" he recalled. Stephen happily shared that while he returned to the collegiate classroom, he did not really experience heightened stress levels or periods of burnout because he only took one class at a time. "I even took summer classes but because I only took one class a semester, and only met once a week, it was extremely manageable," he shared.

With support from his school administration, Stephen was able to continue his education without having to rearrange his life's schedule. He explained his feelings about going to classes:

I loved going to school. Enjoyed sitting in that classroom, and not thinking about work at all ... Sitting there, and then absorbing all of that information and talking to other people

who were like-minded ... we had the same goals, and we were at the same place in life.

(Stephen, 2018)

Like Renee, Stephen was able to continue his social life, maintain his school responsibilities, and still pursue his education without disruption. “I’m not a very fast reader, so I’d read a little bit each day,” he explained while discussing how he organized his schedule to make sure he fit everything in. “I went to class, maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays and then took a few days after class to relax and live. I’d work a little on the weekends, then go to class again.” Being able to work on his own schedule prevented Stephen from having to miss out on aspects of life without the stress of rearranging his life around his coursework.

### **Bumps Along the Way**

In all professions there will be adversity and when difficult situations arise at the worst times, it is challenging to bounce back. Some of the research participants experienced what they considered to be great challenges throughout their experiences that sometimes put their continuation and motivation in question. For some, teacher burnout was a real fact of life and without a strong support system, burnout could have very easily ended their careers or their pursuit of higher education.

**Personal challenges.** Kristine and Tony both expressed having difficulty finding the work-life balance. With no family in the city, Kristine was on her own trying to manage everything alone. Struggling to stay on top of her assignments, managing work responsibilities, and attempting to have a life outside of the classrooms, Kristine found herself having to give something up. In her situation it was easier to give up herself. Her life became consumed by assignments and deadlines, lesson plans and meetings. When she found time to herself on holidays, she hopped in the car with her dog and drove 15 hours home. Even though she was free

from the classroom at that time, she was not free from the responsibility. She recalled those long car trips:

In the summers and during holidays I would often drive back home... During those times I also had online assignments that needed to be completed...being that so much of my time was consumed by travelling, it was difficult at times because it often meant spending long hours reading or in front of a computer. (Kristine, 2017)

Kristine expressed that her biggest challenge, and one that led to near-burnout, was the lack of time she took for herself. Towards the middle of her program she began to feel more organized and was able to make time to relax which she feels led to her completion of the program and staying in the classroom after she was finished.

Quite the opposite, Tony was married with a newborn at home. He was not physically alone, yet immersed himself in his work, often feeling alone. As a brand-new teacher, Tony lived in his classroom. When he was not on the school site, he was working on things for his classroom. In his “spare” time, he worked on his responsibilities for his certification and master’s degree programs. This caused a huge strain on his home life. “My life became work,” he explained. “Everybody is different but for me, work was my priority.” He attributed his struggle to find balance between work and his home life to his parents and their dedication to their jobs.

My mom, and my dad, are crazy hard workers. My mom is a postal worker, and she’s just everything is work, work, work... that had a huge impact on just the way I treated my work-life balance. I didn’t truly have a work-life balance. I had a work life. (Tony, 2017)

Tony’s struggle to find balance also led to burnout and nearly caused him to walk out on his classroom. “I put a lot of pressure on myself. I wanted to be perfect.” That need for perfection led to an explosive experience in the classroom. Overwhelmed with all he had on his plate,



Tony's frustration reached a boiling point when students arrived to his fourth-grade class in a state of chaos. Refusing to settle, Tony reacted to the mayhem as he referred to it.

I remember I screamed that I wanted everyone to sit down. And I screamed so loud that all these other teachers from other classrooms came rushing to the room like something was on fire. In that moment...I wanted to just pick up my bag and walk out the door.

(Tony, 2017)

Tony's frustration coupled with tensions mounting at home put him in a dark place. He recalled feeling as if he did not want to be at school. He experienced bouts of depression and anxiety building from feeling burned out from all that he was undertaking. "I remember walking in the building many days and just having the feeling of dread." Looking back on those experiences, Tony has realized that what was missing in his life was just that, life. He had focused so much on his job performance that he had lost sight of himself and his family. "Now, I realize family and leisure are very important. I need to worry about mental health." Tony has a renewed passion for education and has moved beyond what he calls "the roughest days in [his] career."

Tony is not the only person who experienced severe burnout. Bryan, too, experienced a point during his first year of teaching where he questioned if he was on the right path. With his only previous teaching experience coming from an English teaching program in Korea, Bryan entered the classroom for the first time with limited experience of teacher expectations. While working concurrently on his certification and his master's degree, he realized that he was unprepared for the classroom. During his first winter break, Bryan questioned his decision to pursue teaching. "The first half of the year was awful. I thought I made a huge mistake. It was so stressful. I grew kind of a resentment, and it sounds crazy, but I grew a resentment towards the kids," he recalled. He was stressed, spending nearly every waking moment at school either

planning for his class or working on assignments. He lost every aspect of a social life and had no family to support him through challenging situations. He was alone and struggling with his decisions.

After wallowing in his struggle, he realized that his resentment was not about the students; it was about his own lack of preparation, which he was working to improve upon. Finally, I realized it wasn't the kids. It was mostly because I wasn't prepared myself. I didn't understand one of the most important things is a relationship, building a relationship with the students" (Bryan, 2017). Once Bryan realized where his burnout was coming from, he was reminded that he had, in fact, put himself in the right place for his career. He discovered the key to success in his classroom, "I just couldn't take myself that seriously. I had to go in and actually build a relationship with those kids, make them want to come to my class. When that happened, actual learning happened" (Bryan, 2017).

Bryan taught at the same private school until he completed both his certification and his master's degree and although he still felt he was "making pennies and devoting every minute to that place," he was able to push through burnout, stress, and fatigue, by remembering the realization that he was where he needed to be in order to become the educator he desired.

Lastly, Patrick experienced a short period of burnout when he realized that all of the responsibilities he had taken on were taking him away from his children more than he had anticipated. As a child of divorce, Patrick strived to spend as much quality time with his young son as possible. The absence of his father growing up pushed Patrick to be a hands-on dad who works beside his wife to raise their family. He and his wife share the responsibilities but Patrick soon realized that he was missing out on the little things when professional and educational responsibilities began mounting. As a leader in committees and study groups in his district, a

mentor teacher for the teacher preparation program at his university, and a grade level leader on his school campus, Patrick found himself struggling to manage his schedule with work, school, and family responsibilities. He reached a point where he briefly considered returning to his past retail job where he could make money to support the family and have a more “normal” life schedule:

I remember conversations with my wife, sitting down, being like I don’t know if I want to do this anymore... I could go back to my old job if I need to. It was just a pile-on.

Everything was just stacking more and more and I definitely felt the burnout. (Patrick, 2017)

Just as quickly as those thoughts came, he felt a release from the responsibility. At the end of that same school year, his student teacher completed his program, he rolled off several of the committees he was leading, and he finished his master’s coursework. “The skies opened, and I remembered, it was good. That year I had a rough group. It was a tough year for me in general, but I made it,” he reminisced.

**Educational challenges.** Shantell and Renee both expressed some challenges with the degree programs they had selected. While not detrimental to their ultimate success, they felt that these barriers caused them moments of reflection and accommodation before moving forward with the tasks they were required to complete. Both women were enrolled in out-of-state university programs online. The convenience of online courses allowed them both to continue their lives without being disrupted by commuting to class weekly. The programs, from different universities, followed the same assignment due schedule: Wednesday and Sunday nights. Because they knew assignments were due at those specific times they could coordinate their schedules to complete their work at their leisure.

The challenge for them, however, was the aspect of online learning that separates the learner from the instructor, the personal interaction. Shantell struggled with being confident in her learning as a result of the online aspect of her coursework. “I found it difficult going online because so often I had to teach myself,” she remembered. “I felt like I had double duty to teach myself and then complete the assignment...then I’d sit on pins and needles waiting for feedback just wondering did I do the right thing? Do I need to do it over?” Not having the personal interaction with her university left Shantell questioning whether she had adequately taught herself the necessary material. Although her grades were above average, she still questioned herself. She shared an experience where she felt a tinge of burnout as she questioned her own appropriateness of the assignment she had completed:

I’m so elementary so when I got to the middle and high school components [of a curriculum map], I was always wondering whether my activities were grown enough.

I’ve only taught lower grades... I tried to stick with the standard but then I wondered if the standard was appropriate for that specific time in the school year. I guess it must have been, because I got an A. (Shantell, 2017)

For Shantell and Renee, understanding their learning in terms of what the university expected was a challenge that they were able to overcome but were never quite sure if they had mastered the expectation exactly right.

For Renee the challenge was a little simpler, her assignments were designed with the university’s home state in mind. Therefore, all activities and tasks for her to complete were planned using standards for teaching that did not match the standards that she was required to use in her classroom. This became especially tricky for her when she had to implement lessons and strategies that did not exactly align with her required pacing in her school district. Luckily

though, she was able to adapt the out of state standards to align closely with her own state standards. Although not a difficult task, it caused frustration because she was unable to simply implement the lesson or strategy as designed by the university. Instead she had to modify it first then follow through with implementation. While she recalls feeling challenged, Renee expressed appreciation for learning to adapt:

Sometimes the strategies coincided with what I was teaching but because the standards were different I had to adapt the skills to match what I was teaching here in Louisiana. ... That helped me reflect a lot because I was in the habit of trying new things to see what was working. (Renee, 2017)

### **Bringing It All Together: The Long (and Bumpy) Road to Success**

Teacher-scholar participants expressed high expectations for not only their learning but also the universities that would provide the instruction. This crucial point in their career was an enormous undertaking that was not taken lightly. The participants endured long nights, stress, anxiety, depression, sacrifice, and adversity while working both as a teacher and higher education student. In order to manage their schedules, that could be overwhelming at times, participants developed routines and schedules that would allow them to accomplish everything they needed to do in order to keep on top of their work responsibilities and their assignments.

While seeking lifelong learning and constantly working to better themselves, the teacher-scholars experienced a wide array of emotions, challenges, successes and setbacks while they were concurrently teaching and taking classes. Through the struggle, they emerged successful but not without sacrifice. After their programs were completed, participants realized that leisure and relationships are necessary components to maintaining a healthy balance between work life and home life.

### **Theme 3: “I could go make more money doing something else but I don’t want to...**

#### **I could go to school for the rest of my life and be happy.”**

When researchers define motivation, they use terms such as intrinsic, to represent a motivation that is driven by innate desires for personal satisfaction, or extrinsic to explain an outside source or demand that pushes someone to engage in an activity or to achieve something. In this study, participants discussed varying motivations for their degree programs and what pushed them to continue to the end when times were tough. Motivation often cannot be seen or justified by anyone other than the person living the experience and going through times in their life when they must find motivation to continue on their determined path.

#### **Self-Directed Learning**

Motivation is a powerful aspect in learning. For participants in this study, an intrinsic motivation to seek an advanced degree pushed them towards not only beginning their journey, but also working diligently throughout the process. Their perseverance enabled them to continue through adversity to emerge successful at the end of their degree programs. Often the intrinsic motivation served as a catalyst for more than just inner encouragement for success. Throughout the discussions, several participants shared what may have started as a motivation from within then expanded to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations from multiple sources.

As Jennifer shared her experiences, she talked about her beginning in higher education and how that guided her through the next stages in her programs, “I felt like I was bettering myself in the process of learning all these new things... that motivated me.” She went on to discuss how her connections to other people in the programs led her to be on top of things and more aware of what was going on in the courses:

On Sunday nights when a paper was due for a class, me and this girl, my friend Jaime, we had class together, she would call me, or I would call her... I always found myself really successful when I made a friend in the program, and then that person and I would motivate each other. (Jennifer, 2017)

For teacher-scholars like Jennifer, continuing education was a self-driven action, however the motivational influence of having a friend involved for collaboration, helped her move along at a steady pace and resist the opportunities to procrastinate on projects or to fall behind because of outside influences in her life. She remarked, "I found that when you go through these programs and you have a friend, you're helping each other along the way." That collaboration resonated with Jennifer and even in her continued educational endeavors, she seeks out others who can be a springboard of ideas for her when she is experiencing challenges.

Like Jennifer, Karen too enjoyed being in the classroom. Her joy for learning was apparent in her interview as she repeatedly expressed how much she enjoyed going to class and learning from those around her. She stated, "You know what? I really enjoyed the courses. I enjoyed the topics, there were some things I didn't – the writing! ...But what really kept me going was I was really interested in everything that I learned." During the discussion, Karen's bright smile and joyful tone expressed her inner enjoyment for learning. She smiled, laughed, and talked expressively with gestures of writing and reading and explained how some of those actions may not have been her favorite things to do but the enjoyment of learning made it more engaging and fun than she had envisioned. She was exceptionally expressive in discussing her statistics class:

I had to take statistics. And I really enjoyed it... I really did... I just liked working those formulas. It took time to practice. I would come home and I would work those problems.

I would sit there. I mastered it. I was really on it! (Karen, 2018)

Like Jennifer, Karen also discussed how support from her colleagues, both in her classes and on her school site, influenced her motivation to be successful. “That was a big piece for me, because if you don’t have that support... the support motivated me to want to continue. It gave me the stamina or I guess just the motivation, what I needed to continue,” she explained.

Patrick, although in a different program setting than Karen and Jennifer, experienced similar motivation coming from those in his program. Although he defines himself as a “purely self-motivated” learner, Patrick shared candidly about an encounter he had with an author who helped organize his life integrate continuing education into his already hectic schedule:

I discovered a guy named Cal Newport. His whole thing is study hacks, life hacks, all of that... Instead of making a to-do lists, he preaches block time. You block the time for whatever you need to do. No matter what, I still blocked off time to be with my children... I blocked off periods of time to work and study... I think it helped for sure to stay on track and keep motivated that things were getting done. (Patrick, 2017)

In addition to his personal drive for developing himself as a professional, and diligently blocking his time to complete his tasks without missing out on the lives of his children, Patrick expressed a similar comradery that Jennifer and Karen had expressed. For Patrick, being a part of the same 15-person cohort throughout his whole program created a built-in team to motivate each other. His group met weekly and checked in with each other along the way, “We didn’t have to post online or do message boards, we talked... That group motivation to finish worked” (Patrick, 2017).



Before concluding the discussion surrounding Patrick's motivation, he chuckled and shared one last thought, "I do have a first cousin and she does have a doctorate of education. She and I were always back and forth; we are so very competitive and its life... Hate to be like that, but it does help" (Patrick, 2017). A little friendly competition between cousins seemed to help Patrick muscle through long school days, nights with the kids, and late nights with classes and coursework. With his intrinsic motivation and the support of his family and his cohort, Patrick stayed eager to complete the program and refused to throw in the towel, even on his worst days.

Tony, unlike most other participants, was entering his master's program with very little teaching experience. For him, education in general was a personal desire, and he would stop at nothing to achieve his goal:

My original desire to obtain a master's degree was huge. I wanted an advanced degree...Education was personal for me... my dad, from young he had impressed upon me that education was everything and I had this opportunity. It would be difficult but I was going to do it. (Tony, 2017)

Tony's desire to advance his education while concurrently working in a teacher certification program was not without struggle. His motivation to succeed stemmed from his confidence as a learner, "I feel pretty self-sufficient when it comes to learning in general. I knew that whatever I was going to take on that I'd be able to handle it, whatever was thrown my way." Although life was challenging for Tony during his program, he never let the adversity impact his motivation to succeed. Even with their marriage on shaky ground, Tony expressed that his wife's support helped push him towards reaching his educational goals. With his father and his upbringing in the back of his mind, Tony struggled through a tough first year teaching, setbacks in his

certification program, and added pressures and responsibilities at home and at school. He recalled the impact his father had on his motivation to succeed:

Education in the Caribbean is a part of the culture... very young, we were always reading. If we didn't have homework on the weekends, he made homework for us. Read this paper, son, and tell me about it. What did you read?... If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. (Tony, 2017)

The impact of Tony's father and his upbringing helped motivate him and keep him focused on his education even when he felt the world was crumbling around him.

For Jennifer, Karen, Patrick, and Tony, the inner drive to be successful was fully supported by those around them who tried to understand their plight, their needs, and desires for continuing education. Having a friend or group of classmates or a supportive university mentor along the way made the journey a little bit easier.

### **No Turning Back**

Motivation to begin a challenging task often takes different forms as a person moves towards completion. This was illustrated through the stories told by Stephen, Gabby, and Kristine. For Kristine, she began her degree program because she felt the inner-need to better herself as a professional. For Stephen and Gabby, they had specific end-goals in mind: Gabby to move out of state to teach, Stephen to become an administrator. Throughout the learning process, however, after experiencing the teacher-scholar journey, each encountered a turning point in their learning that could have easily led them astray but they stayed the course and succeeded, each in their own way expressing that quitting was not an option.

Kristine worked hard in her classroom, trying new strategies to engage her students, integrating technology and hands-on activities, exposing students to various experiences that

would stick with them over time. Yet still she wanted to do more. She felt the natural progression in her career would be to obtain her master's degree and broaden her knowledge base. She had no definite career motivation at the time to move beyond a classroom teacher but her dedication to learning kept her thinking positively, "I spent hours at the library working on assignments but I always kept in the back of my mind that the extra work would pay off when it was finished." Her positive attitude helped her to prioritize her life and when she found herself facing burnout, her parents reassured her that she has never been one to quit or give up:

My parents helped keep me motivated to keep going. There were times that I was really frustrated with all of the work that I had, when there were other things in my life that I needed or wanted to do. My parents were there to keep me encouraged in those times.

When I was finally finished and they were proud of me, it made it all worth it. (Kristine, 2017)

Kristine's no-quit attitude and her parent's unconditional support pushed her through phases of burnout and energy depletion. Feeling the support from her family and her inner motivation gave her the stamina she needed to succeed.

Like Kristine, Stephen also had a strong desire to always finish what he started. After teaching for several years, Stephen felt compelled to look beyond his classroom and move into school administration. He expressed a "yearning" that was pushing him to reach outside of his classroom, to lead the school as opposed to only his class.

[During the program] I never felt like what I was doing was not the thing for me. I didn't realize that until much later. I wanted to be... an assistant principal, if not principal ... I ended up enjoying the classroom more. But that was my motivation, just really, I finish what I start. (Stephen, 2018)

Stephen enjoyed his coursework so much that he expressed that he never experienced burnout or major frustration, which he attributes to the fact that he took only one course at a time so his education did not overwhelm his personal life or his work life.

Just like Stephen, Gabby's commitment to education pushed her to continue her master's degree program when she experienced a path-changing breakup. While many people in her life had encouraged her not to begin the program at all, she ignored their advice, enrolled, and stayed in the program. As she began to rebuild her life, she realized that her motivations to succeed in her master's degree program also changed. Her biggest hurdle was expressed to her by some of her previous professors – her age. She was in her early twenties and had no teaching experience. Their doubts fueled her success:

My main motivation was just to finish and prove people wrong ... I felt like I had to stand up and compete with everybody else ... like some people did take me as a joke when I was in the classrooms ... I was definitely the youngest. I felt like they were wondering: What are you doing here? I just felt like I had to prove my professors wrong, my past professors, my co-learners, and my classmates. (Gabby, 2018)

With intrinsic motivations being driven by external sources, Gabby used her newfound learning to arm herself with knowledge that would set her apart from other brand-new teachers. She became vested in the program though she no longer desired to seek the degree for out-of-state teaching certification. Her motivations changed after seeing how she could make an impact as an administrator one day. She was eager to share her learning with others and felt personally motivated to bring up new trends and strategies that she had learned. She recalled talking with veteran teachers about her classes:

I actually felt very powerful... I was going to school multiple days and saying scenarios or suggestions or things that I've learned or picked up in grad school that my coworkers had no idea what I was even talking about. They were like, oh, I want to know more. So, I actually felt it opened doors for me. (Gabby, 2018)

Through adversity and doubt, Gabby found herself more motivated than ever to succeed in her program. In doing so, she was sharing her knowledge with others, showing her school administration that she was taking her career and her education seriously and paving the way for a marketable future as an informed educator and potential school leader. The common thread among Stephen, Gabby, and Kristine's motivation is their refusal to quit and the motivation to see things through from start to finish. In each of their stories, the no-quit attitude pushed them to be better and do better regardless of what happened along the way.

### **Breaking the Cycle, Seeking Financial Freedom**

For first generation college graduates, Renee and Bryan, the journey to pursue an advanced degree was driven by their personal goals for lifelong learning and to need break away from the family and community cycle they experienced growing up. Their childhood and formative years were spent in middle class communities where "blue collar" jobs were the norm. Families worked long, hard hours, to provide for their families and often struggled to maintain an active quality of life. Both Bryan and Renee expressed that their success was fueled by a determination to break the "blue collar" cycle.

When Renee started her higher education journey, she envisioned herself working on her master's degree to improve her practices as an upper elementary math teacher. She enjoyed the classroom and trying various strategies with her students. She explained how her experimenting in the classroom kept her motivated and engaged with her coursework:

I always wanted to try something new! I wanted to see if something else worked. I also started reflecting on my teaching... Working on my master's degree really helped me because I could examine the strategies, try it out, and report back... I stayed in the habit of seeing what was working and what was not. (Renee, 2017)

Those experimental strategies helped to open Renee's eyes to a future in education that she had not considered before, "I started thinking of career advancement and other opportunities I would have after I completed the program so that really kept me motivated." That motivation proved to be necessary for Renee; she began to experience both teacher and student burnout towards the end of her program. Her final case study assignment was more overwhelming than she had imagined. She was no longer in control of her schedule or when tasks would be completed. "The final course was online but I had to sit with teachers, look at data, interview kids ... that could only be done on someone else's schedule," she recalled. Renee tried to keep a positive attitude, reminding herself about the marketability and the options for advancement that would come after she completed her capstone assignment.

When she began her master's degree, Renee had not thought about career advancement but over time she realized that she wanted to make more of herself and her career. She reflected on her upbringing and how her formative years helped her develop a need for growth and a move outside of the classroom:

I was only the second in my entire family to get a college degree... I was motivated because education is just the key for everything and I don't want to go back where I came from... I don't want to equate money with success, but of course you know you don't want to go back. I have to keep myself marketable so that I am able to enjoy things better than I did growing up. (Renee, 2017)

Renee grew up in a suburb of New Orleans, in a minimally diverse community. Her parents worked long, hard hours to provide for their household and sent all of their children to the community public schools. Renee's motivation to succeed and build a strong educational foundation pushed her to make life decisions in her late twenties and early thirties that her parents were unable to do until much later in life, such as buying a home and funding her own education. As she mentioned, while she does not wish to equate money to success, she understands that living a comfortable lifestyle does not come without dedication.

Bryan's motivation to achieve academic excellence also stemmed from a financially challenging upbringing. After an educational hiatus after high school he came to the realization that he did not want to live the life he had grown up in: "I don't want to live a life in poverty. My mom and dad - dad was a mechanic and mom was a substitute teacher. We made maybe forty thousand a year, combined. I don't want to live like that," he explained.

Bryan struggled trying to find the balance between work (teaching), school, and the part-time job that he had to have to make enough money to survive. While working on his certification and his degree, he was barely making enough money to pay living expenses. He remembered the long, hard days:

I was taking master's courses online... and teaching English. I was learning as I went... I would leave school – it was also a depressing thing every time I would leave school and be the last one to leave... I mean this was every day. (Bryan, 2017)

Bryan knew that although the time was difficult, he was working for a higher purpose. His future would greatly benefit from his sacrifices:

If this is what adulting was like, I wanted to go back to bartending. It was super stressful. But I knew that there was a light at the end of that tunnel. I knew that summer break was

going to come ... it was nice having insurance, too. That and the 401k made it worth it at the time. I was stable enough to not worry about bills anymore but now the stress came in of just maintaining life. (Bryan, 2017)

Bryan struggled to stay motivated with very little support. Estranged from his family and with no significant other or time for a social life, he felt alone. Through depression and struggle, he powered through on self-determination and the belief that his hard work would eventually pay off.

When I think back on those days, it's like, "Damn, those were the black hole days of my life." ... I knew it was all going to be for something... I still have the piece of paper around here somewhere. It's a little yellow sheet of notepad paper... in 2013, I made a timeline. Where I was then, and how many years it was going to take me to finish the master's and what I'm going to do after that ... All the way I think to 2017. I just found the paper the other day, and I did it all. (Bryan, 2017)

Bryan and Renee both worked through their master's degree programs in an effort to build a better life for themselves and to set themselves up for a future of success in education, whether as a classroom teacher or a more supportive role in the school system.

### **Setting a Good Example**

Shantell comes from a family of educators. Following in her mother's footsteps, her journey to a master's degree was a no-brainer however the motivation behind her success changed along her path. "Education was really big on my mother's side of the family. Almost everyone is a teacher," she shared. Shantell's motivation is not solely family or career oriented. As a mainstay in her church, she serves as the Youth Director and recognizes that there are many young women that look to her for guidance, as a role model. Their admiration helped to see her



through her program to ensure that she was setting a good example for the younger members in her congregation:

The other little teenage girls are following behind me. They say, “Oh I want to be like you!” I guess maybe they look at me and see their future self. Maybe they figure if she can do it, I can do it too... We come from the same kind of neighborhoods and we’ve gone through the same types of things. We went through public schools and [they] just figure if she can do it then I can do it, too. (Shantell, 2017)

Shantell took her educational journey on as a way to self-improve and to be sure that she was always putting the best foot forward for herself and for all the young women and men that look to her for guidance. Shantell entered her program looking to build her knowledge base surrounding students and their reading. After struggling to teach students to read for many years, she realized that something needed to change in order for her to reach her students more effectively. She explained:

I noticed that the students these days just don’t learn how to read. I don’t know what the disconnect between the classroom teacher and the kids is so I really wanted to learn other strategies to help my students learn how to read. (Shantell, 2017)

As a teacher who “wants to give the students the best,” she used their needs to fuel her motivations for learning. She read, researched, and collaborated with her classmates through her online courses to find strategies that would help her students rise to the challenges they had been facing.

Like Shantell, Sydney also had people looking up to her and depending on her and the success she had as an educator. When Sydney’s life was sent into a tailspin of what to do next and how to support her family on her own she reflected on leadership opportunities she had over

her years in the classroom: mentoring teachers and student teachers, being a teacher leader, coordinating committees and conducting parent and community outreach. When it came time for Sydney to make moves in her life to change her future, administration seemed like an obvious choice. “Having my master’s degree and additional options on where I might work and what I might be able to do was enough motivation for me to start,” she remembered thinking.

Sydney considers herself a serious adult learner, explaining that when she considered taking on the added responsibility she did so with not only the drive to get it done, but also to do it well, “My motivation was constantly fueled by providing for my children, building a successful life as a single person, and having a desire to do something for myself for once in a long time” (Sydney, 2017). Sydney’s journey as a teacher-scholar gave her the much-needed freedom, both personally and financially. Not unlike many other participants though, she did not do it alone. Sydney’s children and grandchild at the time were relying on her for support, her students were relying on her for education, and Sydney’s family was relying on her to build her own happiness. Sydney’s attributed her determination to persevere and find success at a challenging time in her life to both her strong faith and support from family and friends. For Sydney, the motivation to enter and complete a master’s degree program was the necessity to advance in her career, increase her salary, and provide stability for her family. While financially motivated at the beginning, her passion for education and dedication to her family and the field that she loves, saw her through to the end.

### **Bringing It All Together: Motivation**

Motivation to undertake such a monumental endeavor such as a master’s degree is not something that can be expressed with statistics however, given the data from this study, 100% of the participants entered their program by their own admission of being self-directed learners

seeking something more for their future. Secondly from their intrinsic motivation to start, motivation to continue the program came from many different avenues. While some were motivated by career advancement and finances, others were motivated by family members who encouraged them along the way. Determination to succeed motivated many of the participants to see their programs through to completion even when they felt overwhelmed and defeated. Two participants cited their educational advancement was also fueled by a deep-rooted need to break the family financial cycle of their childhood; advancing their education and careers would potentially offer them a sense of financial freedom that their parents never experienced. Lastly, participants saw themselves as role models for their children and their students. That motivation pushed them to work hard, with determination and pride in themselves, to engage in concurrent teaching and learning.

#### **Theme 4: “What a blessing it was for me to have a great support system!”**

The social interaction among groups of professionals and those around them has been shown in the results of this study to provide not only support but also an influence in motivation for perseverance and continuation through times of challenge and success. The following discussion shares how participants perceived the support they received from their family, colleagues, and university. Participant stories also highlight the support they received from non-educators and educators alike.

#### **Family was Vital to Success**

Taking on any responsibility impacts more than just the person who is entering into a new commitment. Without a strong backing from the family members who will be directly involved, taking on additional tasks can pose challenges that could deter someone’s success. In the case of some of the participants, their families rose to the occasion and proved to be

invaluable to the success of the teacher-scholars. Without the support from their family, these participants would not have been as eager to pursue their degrees, and in some cases, would not have been able to do so at all.

For Kristine and Jennifer, the support of their families helped them continue on through challenging classes and rough periods in their careers. Kristine found herself relying on her family to keep her motivated to continue her education. Her biggest supporters were her parents who she said “encouraged me to go back to school when I did.” Even though separated geographically, she recalls her parents being “there for her” whenever she needed them. “Whenever I was struggling or frustrated, it was them who I would call to vent to.” Her parents’ support was her catalyst for continuing her degree as she adds that, “their support was very influential to me. My parents kept me motivated to keep going.”

Like Kristine, Jennifer found solace in her family’s support. During her first master’s degree she was single, living with her brother. When she found herself challenged by her class or her courses, she looked to her parents and her brother. Her mother, also employed in the field of education, was able to be her sounding board, sharing ideas back and forth and giving advice from situations she has witnessed working in the public-school system over the last few decades. She discussed her relationship with her mother:

My mom was always asking me about ... I would tell her what was happening at work and at school and how things were going. Then she would tell me how things were at her school... It was just so helpful – I find other people’s perspectives and their experiences helpful in helping me to see how I should handle things. (Jennifer, 2017)

For Kristine and Jennifer, having those people in their lives to rely on for extra encouragement helped to keep them on a path of ultimate success. For Sydney and Patrick, however, family

support was necessary for more than motivation. Without the emotional support and assistance in helping with their children, they would have to put their educational goals on hold.

Sydney found herself at a professional crossroads. She took on the challenge of pursuing her education at what she called, “an emotional time of rebuilding of [her] life and the lives of [her] children.” As she spoke about the support she received from her family, her voice quavered and she choked up:

What a blessing it was for me to have a great support system. My family stepped in each and every time I needed them... Without that support system, I am not sure I would have attempted a program to further my education, and what seemed so monumental then, is now a focal point on how far I have come and all that I have accomplished. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney’s close-knit family, and her coworkers, which she referred to as her “school family” stepped up to do whatever possible to ensure that she was able to focus on her education. She expressed thanks and appreciation by looking back on those who helped her along the way,

With the grace of God, guidance from those who love me and care for me, and the support of my family and colleagues, I was able to sustain the motivation I needed to be successful... My family helped keep my personal life afloat while I concentrated on my back to school journey. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney’s appreciation for her family and her support system demonstrates the impact that support can have on a professional seeking success for their future. Without her family, Sydney would not have been able to move forward in her education thus halting her career advancement to an administrator and potentially causing financial hardship for her and her children.

Patrick, like Sydney, also had a family to support and while financial stability was not a challenge at the time, he worried that as a public-school teacher married to a public-school teacher and raising a family, the financial burden of teacher salaries would one day cause struggle in their family. With the support of his wife, he enrolled and began taking classes. Along the way he received support from his school team – grade level, administrators, and his district, from his friends – educators and non-educators alike, and his family. What he did not realize is how much he would need that support along the way. During his program, he and his wife made sacrifices and balanced schedules so that their children rarely had to go without one or the other. Missing time with his family challenged his motivation but did not cause him to discontinue his pursuit of an advanced degree. He talked about time he spent away from his children:

I feel like every time I sat in that class on Tuesday nights, I was not giving him [his son] a bath. I wasn't able to read to him... He'll probably never remember it... to me, it was one of those things... I need to do this [obtain an advanced degree] for the family, but at the same time, this sucks. (Patrick, 2017)

Without the support of Patrick's wife, and her ability to maintain their household and their family while he continued his education, Patrick would not have been able to attend classes and fulfill his requirements. Patrick's support system proved to be invaluable when situations came about where neither he or nor his wife could be present for their children due to professional obligations. Patrick recalled a situation where his closest friends stepped in to lend support:

Parent-teacher conferences for my wife and I [sic] fell on the same day. My mother was on a turnaround, ... My stepdad was on a turnaround in Kansas. The kids had to get

home. Her [his wife's] parents were not here. My friend and his wife said, 'all right – well I'll get the kids for you.' (Patrick, 2017)

Patrick attributes the kindness and support from his friends to the small-town community he grew up in and is now raising his family in. "A lot of the people I know, I've known for a long time." During his master's program, he felt like he had no excuse but to be successful, because everybody was rooting for his success, "I couldn't just say, 'gosh, I couldn't get that assignment done because I had nobody helping me.' I had more than enough people helping me, and I've got to be grateful for that."

Having the support of family and close friends while attempting to maintain a career and pursue higher education was influential for Jennifer, Kristine, Sydney, and Patrick. The care, assistance, and emotional support they received was not only motivating, but vital to their ultimate success.

### **Colleagues were Instrumental**

Whether it be between a grade level team, a content-based group of teachers, school administrators, or a group of colleagues that work well together, there is always someone who is there for everyone. Many participants experienced a strong sense of support from their school family while they were concurrently teaching and attending classes.

**Fellow teachers.** Shantell and Patrick both discussed the strong connection with their grade-level teams. Having a group of people who work so closely together provided each of them the opportunity to prioritize without having the fear of falling behind in their job responsibilities.

Patrick works on a team of five English Language Arts teachers who share the workload. He explained how they helped to keep him afloat while he was maintaining courses, teaching,

and a rigorous schedule of committees and leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom, “Instead of having to do the lesson plans they were like, ‘Patrick, just create the formatives [assessments] and we’ll take care of the lesson plans’... the sharing definitely happened,” (Patrick, 2017). At the department level, Patrick was also conducting meetings and leading committees of teachers. He expressed thankfulness for his team and their ability to see where he needed assistance and helped without him explicitly asking for help. “I’ve always felt grateful that I have a team of teachers around me that support me no matter what.”

Similarly, Shantell shared that she experienced the benefits of a strong grade level team after moving from first grade to second grade. At the same time, she began her master’s program. Shantell recalls the change she felt after struggling with her class and their parents in first grade, all while working on a team that did not always work well together:

After I was moved up a grade, everything changed. The class, not me... the new team I was a part of was way more supportive. Not to say that the first-grade team wasn’t supportive, but my new team was more cohesive, we worked together much better.

(Shantell, 2017)

That cohesion helped Shantell to organize her time better. As a grade level they set up a schedule to create plans and tests that revolved around her assignments so that she was able to ensure that all of her work, for both her classroom and her coursework, was done at the appropriate time.

Bryan found that his biggest support systems would be on his school site. A self-driven learner with no support from his family, Bryan found that his school family really wanted to see him succeed. Although there was a severe lack of professional development in the private school where he was teaching, he was offered many opportunities to observe, debrief, and collaborate with veteran teachers in order to improve his own teaching practices. “They didn’t provide



professional development or anything like that but they pushed me along the way giving me good feedback, instead of just letting me drown,” he explained. He shared his experiences as a “green” teacher:

I was new, but I was also excited to learn tips and techniques from everyone. We had some really good teachers. I took that opportunity ... to be observed from other teachers and get more feedback. I think the want to learn and other teachers seeing that, made it easier for me when I made mistakes. The administration knew I was a new teacher, but I was trying to be better. They all pushed me along the way. (Bryan, 2017)

Those observations and the accompanying feedback was the backbone of Bryan’s support. He felt encouraged by the teachers and administrators who showed him that they wanted him to succeed.

Stephen and Renee’s needs for support were very different than the other participants, however, their stories were similar to each other. Both Stephen and Renee described their learning endeavors as self-driven with Stephen saying, “My learning was very self-directed,” and Renee that she had always been “sort of a self-motivated, self-driven person.” While their experiences in teaching and in their own education were very different, they both discussed a surface-level support from their university and a level of approval and pride from their families but that they both felt that they did not need support. It was only when they required assistance from administration and coworkers did they seek some sort of support from anyone other than themselves.

Renee explicitly stated, “I wasn’t really looking for the approval or support of others so I didn’t reach out a while lot until I needed their help to complete my final case study.” Stephen similarly commented, “At school only my friends would cover for me if I had to leave early. But

it was only once a week.” Stephen and Renee both worked in school environments that they were familiar with, and both had administrative teams that were aware of their educational goals. Since they were settled in their positions and did not have extensive social lives outside of school, they were able to arrange their educational needs and goals around their personal lives. In doing so, those around them were not impacted by their education and often were not aware of the extra responsibilities they had taken on therefore there was no outpouring of support beyond the normal support a family, friend, or coworker would provide.

**School administrators.** In addition to the support the participants received from their grade level teams, a few expressed specific appreciation for the support they received directly from their administrators. From arranging interviews, to allowing time off and assisting with covering classes if necessary, it appeared that school administrators were eager to see their teachers working towards bettering themselves and advancing their education.

Shantell regularly discussed her needs and progress with her principal. She described her principal as lenient, kind, and accommodating as she assisted with finding placement for middle and high school field experiences, offered to cover classes if she was running late due to field work or interviews, and provided an open-door policy if ever help was needed. She also helped to determine a site supervisor that would help monitor Shantell’s academic progress and report back to her university.

Patrick also had a good rapport with his administrator, which made his educational advancement a possibility. Patrick boasts that his principal, also a male educator, was phenomenal. “He basically did everything he could.” Patrick expressed gratitude when explaining that his school schedule extended late into the afternoon, which would have made him late for class:

They switched my planning period to last... I had a para[educator] dismiss my class. We finish at 3:45 and there's no way I'm making it across the river by 4:00 p.m. ... I left a little early so I could be in class on-time. (Patrick, 2017)

His principal's support did not stop with a simple schedule change. When Patrick began working towards his internship hours, his principal gave him additional responsibilities so that he could meet the requirements while still teaching his fourth graders. "I've been very fortunate. I love my school and my parish for that. If you're trying to do something, nine times out of ten they're going to help you." Patrick is such a proponent for his district that a job in teacher recruitment is on his radar if one becomes available.

Karen, much like Patrick and Shantell, found great support in her school principal while working on her degree. She recalled her principal at the time giving her the green light to observe teachers and collaborate for her program during her planning time. "Whether it was to observe a classroom, teachers were supportive, as well as my administrators," she explained. When it came to class projects that involved professional development and leadership opportunities, she was always supported:

I just passed it by administration and had full support... If I had to hold a professional development or take part in some sort of development, she took the time to give me an opportunity to participate. (Karen, 2018)

Karen appreciated the trust her principal had in her and welcomed the opportunities that her educational advancement was opening up for her.

### **University Professors and Mentors**

Participants all shared very similar sentiments regarding the support they received from their universities. Most stated that their professors and instructors were available via phone,

email, or discussion board. Some discussed the mentors that were assigned to them and how the mentors guided them through difficult situations.

Tony and Bryan both shared that their universities assigned a mentor professor. While going through concurrent certification and master's degree programs, Tony and Bryan were juggling challenging master's coursework, certification courses, and teaching for the first time, all at once. Tony discussed a challenging situation where his mentor had to step in and guide him towards bettering his classroom management in order to become an effective teacher:

She saw how much I was struggling with discipline, or classroom management. I got a lot of instruction from her... My mentor was in and out, taking notes on what I was doing and would give me a lot of behavioral recommendations. (Tony, 2017)

After being placed on a second-year extension, Tony realized that his mentor was providing him the support that he really needed and he started taking those recommendations to heart and putting them into practice in his classroom. He began “doing things like checking for understanding, using a timer, doing very specific behavior things” that he had not been doing in the past. He recalls thinking “whatever” when she initially made those recommendations but after videotaping and watching his own teaching, he noticed things he had not realized before.

That [mentor support] was huge. I started to take her advice. I want to improve on those things I see in myself...that really changed my behavior as a teacher – it changed the way I thought about my [teaching] approach. (Tony, 2017)

Like Tony, Bryan also had a mentor who visited; however, his experience was vastly different. “Throughout my first year, I had observations. My professor came in and watched. The first year was a struggle,” he said. However, when asked to elaborate on what support he received from the mentor, there was nothing to talk about. Bryan explained that his professor

came from out of state to observe but did not provide feedback that helped him to improve. He continued to struggle through that first year of teaching, only getting support from colleagues in his school building. He recalled feeling very alone:

For my master's program there was nobody to support me... my school administration had trust in me, which meant a lot, because I was learning as I went... But as far as a support system, it was nonexistent during my first-year teaching. I was a very alone person inside of my head. (Bryan, 2017)

Bryan struggled but did not give up. After powering through the first challenging year he started seeing improvements in himself.

Shantell, Karen, Kristine and Stephen each made a very similar remark about the support from their respective universities saying that they were there, only a call or email away. The professor made themselves available and typically had a quick response if teacher-scholars had questions or concerns. Shantell felt as if she had to “teach” herself through her online coursework, “I do find it difficult going online. You often have to teach yourself first before going online to do the assignment” and when she was struggling in a class, the professor contacted her to see what assistance she needed:

They [the university] were very accommodating... They do give you the opportunity to do things over and they give timely feedback. It's not verbal feedback but they do tell you exactly what to do. (Shantell, 2017)

Having the professors be proactive and keeping up with timely feedback provided Shantell continued support although she was struggling with the online aspect of her degree program. She recalled that even with the support from the university, having to teach herself created additional work and responsibility for her which impacted her classroom teaching. “It's part of the reason

why when it comes to my classroom, I have very little left inside of me to give to the students,” she explained.

### **Non-Educators Don’t Understand**

Although nearly all participants felt that they had an integral support system, several participants expressed that for family members and friends who are not educators, it was difficult to understand the needs and responsibilities of teachers in today’s classrooms. Shantell experienced this challenge first-hand with her husband. His support was unending however he struggled to understand why she had to do so much work at home for her students.

He didn’t get it. He doesn’t get all the added stuff that teachers have to do... why I needed to stay home and grade these papers in addition to my graduate school work online... I had to balance how to type the paper and make sure I’m ready for work the next week and cook dinner and make sure the house is clean.... (Shantell, 2017)

Over time, Shantell’s husband began to see that her long hours were helping to make her job and her learning go smoothly. Now, a few years later, he realizes the sacrifices she made for their family. Shantell proudly shared that he has since “come around” and even helps her to grade tests when she has a lot to do.

Like Shantell, Tony struggled with his spouse when he began staying at school until the custodial staff made him exit the building. He recalled a heated discussion the two shared:

So, she was often like, ‘Why do you have to stay so late, you’re there early already, why do you have to stay late, why can’t you do this at home?’ It was just that type of thing where if you’re not an educator, you just don’t get it. You don’t understand. (Tony, 2017)

In Tony’s home, tension and angst from long days spent at his school coupled with long nights spent working on coursework put a wedge in his relationship. As much as he tried to help her to

understand what he was doing and why he was at school early and late into the night, conditions at home slowly deteriorated. “What I was taking on, she was having to take on more... I had a lot of issues with my wife. She even thought that I was cheating with one of the teachers,” he recalled. While Tony’s home life entered a state of decline, he continued to immerse himself in his learning and his classroom. Tony’s decision to put his career and his education first caused a great deal of loss in his life. Relationships were strained; some were lost completely. He struggled to find a work/life balance. His identity became a teacher, then a learner, then a husband and dad. This struggle however, led him to learning that he can no longer let work and his education consume his life.

Jennifer also expressed that a member of her family did not truly understand what it was really like to be a teacher or student, however her situation was vastly different than Tony and Shantell. Jennifer recalled the early days of her relationship with her boyfriend (now husband):

My husband didn’t go to college, so I always felt like he didn’t get it... what it was like to have assignments due and to have to balance things and make certain things a priority and other things were lower on your priority list. Now, years later, it’s like he gets it now.  
(Jennifer, 2017)

After several years he came around and understood the responsibility that is placed on an educator and a higher education student. Over time he realized that Jennifer’s priorities were focused on her educational and professional success and the time she spent teaching and learning would provide a better future for their family. As she continues her education, he now sees her dedication and voices his appreciation more now than he ever had before.

In the experiences of these three participants, having someone who was unsure of the responsibilities and expectations of a teacher-scholar gave them more incentive to push forward.

In one case, the time spent away from family and friends caused more damage than good. In cases, husbands learned to adapt and accept the sacrifices their wives were making to improve their educations and advance their careers. In all cases, the learners stayed true to their beliefs and continued on their path of success.

### **Bringing It All Together: It's Not Easy to Succeed Alone**

Participants all agreed that support made their educational journey a little less stressful. Having a team rally towards their success, cheering them on, and motivating them when they were overwhelmed, anxious, feeling depressed and losing their stamina, helped the participants muster the energy to keep going. Support for the participants came from many aspects in their lives. For most participants, the main source of their support was their immediate family. Family kept their homes running when long hours were spent at work and in class and were the first to step in to pick up the pieces when participants were on the verge of crumbling from the mounting pressures that the teacher-scholars faced.

School “family” was also shown to be influential to the teacher-scholars’ success. In some cases, school administrators acted not only in a supportive, cheerleader role, but also in a liaison role, connecting the scholar to teachers, classes, and field experience opportunities. Some school administrators allowed for personal time for observations and interviews if necessary. Grade level teams were also important for all of the participants. Each shared that their team was ready and willing to help organize lessons and activities or to assist with assignments whenever necessary. Support from universities and classmates was also helpful for the participants. University mentors and professors offered suggestions and advice when teacher-scholars were struggling and made themselves available so that teacher-scholars felt that they could contact their professors with questions, concerns, or for clarification.



**Theme 5: “I feel like I am a reflective person... it kind of forced me to really sit down and think about things.”**

The participants had very strong opinions about reflection and the role reflection plays in their daily lives as educators. While their thoughts were very similar in the end, the ways they came to be the reflective people they are, differed greatly. Participants discussed how reflection is more of a personal habit and how reflection impacts their teaching and learning on a regular basis.

**Habitual Reflection**

“Teachers are normally very reflective,” Stephen said. “As an educator and a student, reflection is so important,” Karen declared. “If you’re not reflective as an educator, then what are you doing?” Patrick questioned. These three statements from participants from very different educational and experiential backgrounds represent the thoughts that were brought up in each of the interviews and in the focus groups. Reflection is relative to teaching just as much as pencils, paper, and standards.

Patrick described himself as a very reflective person, even outside of teaching. He shared situations in parenting that require reflection and evaluation, wondering what he did in situations to either escalate or de-escalate the issues. “I don’t want to say that I self-blame a lot, but I try to look at what I did or how I handled a situation, and how I could improve that. How could I have done better?” He recalled a memory from his childhood that often sparks his internal questioning when situations arise:

I was raised in a house with my grandma who always told me God doesn’t punish with a stick. ... As a kid, I’d stub my toe and she’d say, ‘well, you did something bad to deserve

that.’... to this day if something bad happens to me, my first thought is ‘well, what did I do to cause that? (Patrick, 2017)

His reflective nature continues in his classroom, reflecting on not only his instruction but also his discipline procedures and how he handles parents. His biggest reflective challenge currently is the prescribed curriculum that is mandated by his school district.

I constantly try to find ways to make it better. How can I work within the bounds they give me while also still doing what I love? ... Try to do it with honest sincerity. If it doesn’t work, you just have to move on from it. (Patrick, 2017)

Patrick expressed his dislike for the prescribed curriculum stating that it is something he “bucks everyday” but through reflection and creative teaching, he is able to make it work for his students. He tries to encourage self-reflection in his students by giving them opportunities to take on leadership roles in the classroom.

Like Patrick, Jennifer also feels that reflection is part of her personality. “I feel like I am a reflective person in general,” she said. While Jennifer felt like she always reflected on her teaching practices, her master’s programs made her take time to think “reflectively across the board,” questioning not only what could she do better as the teacher but also about how she handled discussions with colleagues and even friends. Jennifer discussed her reflective practices in her coursework not as a way to do something better, but as a way to build a deeper understanding of the thought processes to bring about instructional improvement:

It [reflection] didn’t necessarily give me the tools to tell me how to teach a specific concept but sitting in a classroom and hearing other people, ... and how they’re doing or handled a situation really helped me to analyze what I was doing... That’s what reflection did for me. (Jennifer, 2017)

Karen considered her reflection in two ways, as a student and as an educator. As a student she reflected on what she learned, what she did, and how her learning was benefiting her end-goal. As an educator she reflected on how to improve her practices and prepare for the next lesson with her students. Considering both her stances on reflection, she explained:

It's just best practice, and it's just something that I want to just make sure to do. I've done it in the past, even though you reflect in your head, make it a habit to journal... that reflection piece is so, so important.

During a focus group, Tony and Renee also discussed the importance of journaling in their lives. Tony talked about learning to be more reflective overtime. In the beginning of his program, he didn't feel as if he was a very reflective person. "Reflecting on the process of reflecting in general, I think before I started teaching I never really [reflected]. I didn't think much of it. I didn't realize how important it was." Tony has grown as a reflective educator and now realizes how important reflection is as well as how it impacts his daily life as he moves into a new role in education:

I started having really organic moments of reflection and it comes out of nowhere. I could be driving...half asleep, or when I'm in the shower... I got a journal. I'm writing down how my day went... It helps me to reflect on everything. (Tony, 2017)

Renee shared that she, too, is a shower thinker who journals. "I'm always just thinking, about today, yesterday, and moving forward to the next days... in the shower and right before I go to bed." Jennifer chimed in to the conversation sharing that, like the others, shower time provides her an outlet to decompress. In that time, she is "reflecting and kind of forethinking at the same time."

## **Professional Reflection**

Reflection plays a different role for the participants. For some teacher-scholars, reflection was inherent; it was an everyday activity whether intentional or not. For others, reflection was dual-purposed, not only to improve their professional practices but also to confirm and direct their future educational and professional needs.

Stephen used reflection during his program to help develop his leadership qualities. Already a reflective thinker, Stephen found himself struggling with a student teacher under his leadership. He thought about what he was learning in his program and adapted that knowledge through reflection. The two began journaling back and forth to each other, sharing thoughts about each day and how lessons went but when it came time for face-to-face discussion, it was difficult. Stephen really honed in on the leadership qualities he was developing through his coursework and found strategies that helped to make their discussions more effective: “Try to listen more than giving a solution, because sometimes maybe she doesn’t want a solution... Then, letting her tell me, which is what we were trained to do in classes. So that’s what I did.” Stephen’s approach to developing positive communication with his student teacher not only caused him to be more reflective about the type of mentor he was for her but also allowed him to encourage her to be more reflective about her own teaching.

Sydney, like Stephen, also pursued her master’s degree in educational leadership after reflecting on her time spent leading her grade level and mentoring student teachers. “I loved the opportunity to teach, train, and lead other adults, as much as I loved teaching children,” she happily shared. During her master’s degree program, Sydney continued to mentor new teachers. This opportunity provided her additional experience with leadership. She and her student teachers reflected together regularly, coming up with strategies that were mutually beneficial for

both the teachers in the classroom and the students. It also instilled the idea of reflectiveness in her student teachers, encouraging them to reflect regularly as a habit to continue growth as a professional even after it was no longer a graded requirement. She proudly shared her fondest reflection of her master's degree program:

I would like to think that as a parent, this journey was an important life lesson for my children. They saw sacrifice that they didn't quite understand at the time, but now they see the fruit of that labor. They saw work ethic and dedication. My high school son sees that it isn't always easy to be a dual-sport athlete and keep your grades up at the same time, but that it is most certainly possible. (Sydney, 2017)

For some of the less experienced educators participating in this study, their discussions on reflection referred more to their reflection to improve their teaching and professionalism and less about reflecting about themselves and planning for their own futures in education. Patrick felt strongly that in order to be an effective teacher, reflection must be a daily occurrence. "If you don't look at every lesson you've taught and go 'well, what worked about this and what didn't work?'" His thoughts mirrored the reasons why Renee, Gabby, Bryan, Shantell, and Kristine feel they have grown as teachers through their master's degree programs.

Renee's reflection as an educator began with her desire to try new things with her students. Her reflection took on a whole new life when she expanded beyond reflecting about her own teaching. She began examining what other teachers were doing, either through observation or her program's discussion boards, and reflecting on how those strategies might benefit her class.

I liked to try new strategies and I became much more reflective in my practices, not only in my instruction but management as well. We had to do those discussion boards and

whatever my classmates would report, I'd go back and try it... It was just helping me to make the classroom more engaging. (Renee, 2017)

Renee's reflections of teaching practices and their effects in her class really gave her an opportunity to explore what was working for her students at that time. It also sparked some personal reflection about how these strategies could have helped classes in her past. "It made me wonder why I hadn't been doing certain things," she explained, "I really reflected on what I was doing well in the classroom and what I could be doing better." Renee's own reflections prompted feedback from others and sparked an interest in teacher mentorship, which could allow her to help other teachers learn and grow through their own reflection.

Gabby began her interview discussing how reflective she is, "I do a lot of reflective practice... I reflect a lot and I always look at what I can do better." Unfortunately, though, her coursework did not necessarily line up with what she could do in her classroom to improve as a first-year teacher working towards a master's degree in educational leadership. It did, however, help her better understand how schools run and the impact student achievement has on individual schools.

Student achievement, that's the main goal for everything. I reflected a lot after learning to analyze data. It helped me to think about myself and what I wanted to do, how I wanted to be better. So, everything I reflected on, I would see what I could have improved. I would get others' opinions, or ask what would you have done? What could I have done better? (Gabby, 2018)

Self-improvement was important for Gabby. Ultimately, that drive for self-improvement gave her the motivation and the guidance she needed to realize that one day she could effectively lead a school, but not until she had more experience as a classroom teacher.

Bryan experienced a lot of self-reflection during his degree program. As a new teacher everything he learned gave him a new way to look at his teaching. His most influential point of reflection came from his realization that he was not the students' friend.

Since I was super tough on them in the beginning of the first year... it was much easier to be tough and then fall back a little rather than go easy then get tough. I wasn't trying to be their friend. (Bryan, 2017)

Reflecting on his initial teaching experiences at the private school led Bryan to realize that it also benefitted him that his eighth graders were still the youngest students in their school. The strategies he used for them did not necessarily work for the juniors and seniors. Reflection helped him to consider his practices and adapt them for the grade level that he was teaching at the time.

Shantell and Kristine told very similar stories about reflection and how learning strategies in their coursework made an immediate impact on things they did in their classroom. Kristine shared her feelings about reflection and how she learns best:

Reflection did play a role in my daily teaching. I tried to apply everything I was learning in my program in my classroom, to make myself better as a teacher. ... We had a class for all subjects – reading, math, science, and social studies. Although some of the information was beneficial, the best way to learn, in my opinion, is by getting experience in an actual classroom... Other classes, like the project based and technology class, was [sic] helpful because I could directly apply it to my classroom. (Kristine, 2017)

The technology class had a profound impact on Kristine's teaching practices. After reading articles on technology usage in the classroom and then reflecting on the lack of technology she was integrating into her lessons, she realized some changes that could be made. Successfully,

Kristine was able to integrate available technology in her classroom thus increasing student engagement and providing a more modern approach to learning.

Shantell, like several other participants, also often reflected on her teaching practices. “Reflection was a daily activity for me,” she remembered. Because her degree program was focusing on literacy from kindergarten through high school grades, Shantell spent a lot of her time planning for and working with students well above the first and second graders that she was used to:

I reflected a lot after implementing new strategies I had learned, even with my middle and high experiences. I would always say how can I bring that back down to the elementary level? Then I would think about what I did with them and how I could use that with my own kids. (Shantell, 2017)

A turning point for Shantell was when she was placed in a high school classroom working with an English Language Learner. She was unsure of the student’s abilities and how she could reach her needs appropriately. After some reflection, she tried what she knew:

A lot of the things that I was doing with my own students actually worked well for her because she was not fluent in English... I sort of reflected back and forth like what was I doing with my field work kids and what could I do for my class and same thing, what I was I doing in my own class and adapt it for my field work students. (Shantell, 2017)

Making those adaptations awakened an interest for Shantell. Having had that experience with that student gave her a peek into an extension of the education field that she could see herself venturing into, English as a Second Language instruction.



## **Bringing It All Together: Reflection Comes in Many Forms**

Reflection is common practice in education. This was apparent in the data collected from all of the participants. Some participants claimed that they found themselves to be habitual reflectors, reflecting on aspects of teaching and learning as well as regularly in life. Reflecting was also used by participants to confirm and improve their teaching abilities. Participants engaged in academic discussion and writing and through feedback from professors and classmate responses. They were able to reflect on their own practices to either confirm their success or evaluate their need for continued experimentation. Overall, participants were in agreement that reflective practice is not only common practice, but also a necessary component to becoming an effective educator regardless of whether you are a classroom teacher, school support personnel, or school leader.

### **Theme 6: “The main things you should know for teaching you don’t learn until you start doing it.”**

In this research study, participants were asked to share experiences they had where they were able to take their learning from course to career. Some participants described experiences that allowed them to experiment with new teaching strategies and to provide their students with alternative instruction. Others described periods of reflection and conceptualization of ideas on a more personal level. For all participants, the role of reflection was vital in their learning, illustrating that the act of simply completing a task has far more learning value when done in conjunction with reflective practice.

## **Managing the Class**

As a brand-new teacher, Bryan was “always learning,” and was finding very quickly that he “wasn’t prepared [him]self.” The learn-as-you-go nature of his certification and master’s

courses left him feeling defeated regularly. His drive to improve as a professional forced him to try anything that was thrown his way:

There were some workshops with my master's program that I really benefitted from.

They added a lot of things to my toolbox...Classroom management strategies - I used those almost like experimental, to see how it worked, and some worked, some didn't.

(Bryan, 2017)

Those classroom management strategies proved to be the key piece that Bryan was missing in his classroom. While he was confident in his content knowledge and was improving on his delivery of instruction, Bryan struggled to make relationships with the students and implementing a successful classroom management plan. He recalled the "book work" aspect of his courses and cited that the learning was coming too late for him: "A lot of the book work, I didn't get anything from. It just seemed more tedious than anything."

There are certain books ... like Wong & Wong, First Days of School that would have been great if I read them before I actually started teaching. I read them halfway through my first year and it's just like 'this would have been great to know.' (Bryan, 2017)

Like Bryan, Tony also struggled as with classroom management as a novice teacher. Tony was frustrated, depressed, and struggling to capture the attention of his students. After having to have his certification program extended, he realized that the students were not going to change themselves. He had to be more reflective and proactive regarding his teaching. He finally felt as if he was improving. After reflecting on his program mentor's suggestions, he began videotaping his teaching and was able to pinpoint areas that he needed to focus on adapting. With support from his mentor, Tony saw the errors of his novice teaching and worked to

improve. He felt like seeing himself actually teaching prompted him to really hone in on the advice his mentor was giving and gave him continued motivation to want to improve himself.

### **New Strategies to Spark Student Learning**

Several of the participants were enrolled in master's degree programs focusing on different aspects of curriculum: four general education, two literacy, and one math and technology. In these programs, the teacher-scholars were required to learn about, implement, and reflect on various strategies. The participants reported that having the opportunity to experiment with new-to-them strategies provided them with real-time data as far as how their learning was impacting their classroom.

**Developing dynamic teaching strategies.** Although Bryan felt as if some of his learning came after-the-fact, he realized a key point in education - the best learning opportunities do not come from a book or a lecture, they come from active teaching, feedback, and reflection. He recalled what it was like to finally be observed by his university and receive some helpful feedback: "Later in the program, I got observed and there were like 40 points on the checklist they look for... it helped me to make those transitions through the lesson easily and being more prepared" (Bryan, 2017).

During those observation cycles, Bryan began to see his teaching from a new angle, realizing that his "teacher talk time was way too high... using too much lecture." Armed with that knowledge, he adapted his teaching to a more student-led classroom, "I was just driving the bus; the students led the class. That's what I felt was a more dynamic classroom. Learning was happening and I could just sit back and watch."

Being in the classroom and understanding the underlying needs for him and his students, Bryan started to see changes in his classroom management style, in his instructional approaches,

and in his students' interactivity in lessons. His new-found sense of reflection and teaching abilities caused him to look at things differently, especially after leaving the Catholic school to return to Korea: "When I went back, as a teacher with experience, and knowing techniques and seeing what they did – which was the same thing they did before... I'm seeing it with different eyes. It was incredibly frustrating." As the English-speaking teacher, Bryan was expected to follow along with the Korean speaking teacher, essentially helping students with language as opposed to actually teaching and leading the class.

I didn't want to just be there as a nice white face that spoke English. I wanted to teach.

They didn't want that. They wanted the white American guy to speak English. I almost felt like I was regressing incredibly as a professional. (Bryan, 2017)

Bryan's commitment to his own professional growth sparked a fire in him to move on and advance in his career.

Like Bryan, once Tony was able to successfully manage his classroom, he was then able to focus on developing teaching skills and implementing strategies that would enable him to be more effective. He became interested in implementing lessons and plans designed to integrate multiple content areas across the curriculum. Tony was passionate about content integration sharing that it had a profound impact on how he approached teaching:

The integration of all of the core subjects – we would have to write lesson plans that touched on science, social studies, math, ELA, all in one... No one else was doing it at my school. Nobody was doing it in my certification program. It was something that I was able to bring from my master's degree program into my classroom. That was one thing that really worked for me, and it felt good! (Tony, 2017)

Tony's implementation of integrating content areas sparked his path to school leadership early in his career. His confidence and successes were seen by others, especially his school principal who became interested in his teaching approach. After successfully doing so in his classroom, his principal began to take notice and sought out Tony's help to make cross-curricular education a more popularly used strategy in her school: "I started delivering professional development. I was doing that, and I was doing well at it... with my co-teachers specifically talking about integrating ELA and social studies, sometimes a little bit of math and science, too" (Tony, 2017). With the support and trust from his administrator, Tony spent the summer between teaching fourth and fifth grade to integrate to develop a plan to integrate the core subjects right around the time that the Common Core State Standards were being implemented for the first time.

**Changing the way students learned to read.** Karen and Shantell both felt compelled to advance their educations in the area of reading and literacy instruction. Both teacher-scholars expressed that students were entering their first and second grade classrooms lacking the basic literacy skills that students were familiar with in years past. Students struggled to master phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Some students had trouble with letter recognition. Both women entered their degree programs with the same goal: to arm themselves with varied strategies to reach all learners.

Karen's program was prompted by both her needs as a child and the growing need in her school district to have more reading specialists available on their school campuses. Karen's experiences in coursework led her to create methods for assessing student literacy needs, pulling more small groups in her classroom and integrating differentiated strategies for both small group and whole group instruction. She recalled what it was like to transition from her fieldwork to her

classroom: “[in the fieldwork] We implemented all of the strategies that we had learned. First, we scheduled the visits then had to do an assessment or screening on the child and that’s exactly what I did in my classroom!” She was very animated while discussing how she had followed the same assessment, implementation, reflection cycles in her classroom:

I could really target the area the child was really struggling in then implement strategies that would help that child develop those skills. We’d do a little post-test, or progress monitoring, to see how well they were moving along. If it’s working, I continue those same strategies. If it’s not, I’ll change and do something else. (Karen, 2018)

Using the varied assessment and instructional strategies prepared Karen to pull more effective small groups and plan for her center rotations, which she discussed in the focus group with other teachers. “I really love doing centers. Mainly because of the impact it has on students’ learning,” she shared. Productivity is key for Karen; effectively running her small groups and implementing her differentiated strategy lessons was necessary for her students’ success:

Sometimes it’s not productive and I’d have to stop and think about how I can make it a productive center... sometimes you have to just move the kids around or make the skill fit the specific group and swap it out when they rotate to that center. (Karen, 2018)

Discussing her centers sparked a discussion of with-it-ness with the other teachers, prompting a quick exchange about anticipating what will happen during strategy lessons. While the teachers in the group with young children were all in agreement, Stephen was honest in sharing his fears about centers: “I wouldn’t be good at anticipating that [unproductive students] ...If I had a group who didn’t work well in that center because of the center, I would be like AHHH and I’m panicking!” (Stephen, 2018).

Shantell shared about her experiences in trying various strategies, in her case, with students in elementary, middle and high schools. “I learned and experimented with different strategies... I got feedback on my work. Then I was able to reflect on it and bring it back to the classroom and implement different things.” Her connections from course to class also stemmed around organizing the implementation of those strategies, “I was really able to implement more reading strategies with my class... things I was learning made sense and I saw some results so I was excited about that” (Shantell, 2017).

Planning and preparing for implementing new strategies left Shantell arranging her schedule to fit in groups with different abilities. In doing so, she was able to organize her time better to be sure that she was able to meet with all of her students. What started as an organizational method to help her meet her university requirements developed into a time management system that she now uses to organize her small groups weekly in her classroom.

**Capturing student engagement.** Renee and Kristine entered different curriculum-based degree programs than the others. Their degree programs, both from out of state universities, were more generalized to curriculum as a whole, rather than literacy. They both shared that student engagement strategies had a great effect on their teaching not only in the area of content knowledge but increasing time on task, as well.

Kristine had been teaching for a few years at the time and was in the habit of trying new things. She recalled being able to apply many different content area strategies to her daily lessons. In her small group instruction, she was able to differentiate activities and outcomes to ensure that her students were accurately moving along in their learning process. Her most influential learning though, came from a technology usage class:

I took one class that was focused on technology. I was able to use some of the programs on the computer that I learned about in class with my third-grade classroom. Some of the articles that I was required to read were also applicable to my students. (Kristine, 2017)

These technology-based programs and articles gave Kristine new tools to target their literacy and math skills by adding interactivity into her lessons. When students were divided into small groups, several were able to work on independent, leveled tasks to ensure that the students were engaged in meaningful learning while direct instruction focused on other students.

Renee experienced similar increases in student engagement with the implementation of new strategies and reflecting on how those strategies were impacting her students, “Our case studies and discussions gave me lots of things that I could actually go back and try out with my kids. I could see whether it would work or whether it was successful or not” (Renee, 2017).

Renee had a very personal realization after noticing the positive impact that implementing and reflecting was having on her class, “I wasn’t necessarily learning only brand-new information, I was sort of recapturing some things that I’d forgotten about over the years.” That recognition of knowledge gave Renee an increased motivation to try as many strategies as possible and to increase student engagement over time. She recalled learning about the “Four Corners” strategy for the first time and feeling as though it helped her to increase student participation and engagement by integrating movement into their learning:

I remember reading about Four Corners... The students had to choose their answer and move to the place that represented their answer. It really helped me to make my lessons more fun for the students. They enjoyed getting up and moving around and I was still conducting formative assessments and fact-checks in the process. (Renee, 2017)



Renee continued to implement new strategies in her classroom throughout her coursework and really focused on the reflection aspect to help develop her understanding of her students' needs. Active experimentation and reflecting and re-evaluating new processes kept her informed on how her instructional practices were helping her students to learn over the course of the school year.

Jennifer, like Renee, was very reflective as a practitioner and worked diligently to implement anything she could from her program into her classroom. She recalled during her first master's program,

I used a lot of what I learned in my master's classes as a teacher. The things that we did in class, or the things that we talked about or when I was listening to how other people were using things in the classroom, I was able to take that back and do it for myself and my kids. (Jennifer, 2017)

Although she did not give specific examples of strategies or tools she used in her classroom, she discussed using reflection of her learning and coursework to guide her class instruction.

Especially once she moved on to her second master's degree in educational leadership.

### **Transforming from Teacher to Administrator**

Four of the eleven participants in this study were working towards degrees that were focusing on educational leadership or school administration, and not curriculum. For these participants, their coursework was geared more towards leading and training adults and less on curriculum strategies and development. This shift in coursework focus did not stop the teacher-scholars from applying what they were learning to their current and future situations in education. As classroom teachers and for some, mentors, utilizing the knowledge they were

gaining from their leadership programs was arming them with tools that would help them tackle challenges that other teachers were facing as well.

Each of these participants brought up school law in their interview sessions, and then again in the focus groups. For some, like Patrick and Gabby, they felt as if school law should be incorporated into undergraduate programs as a required course. For Stephen, and Sydney, school law was a tool they used to develop their persona as an administrator and build understanding of how schools should be run on a day-to-day basis.

Gabby felt strongly that she should have had school law coursework during her bachelor's degree program:

I don't understand why public law is not incorporated in the undergraduate degree. I was so blown away by most of the things that I learned in that class...Starting off as a new teacher, your kind of just 'fend for yourself.' ... when you are in that classroom with those children, you're unsupervised for the first time. (Gabby, 2018)

Gabby's concern stemmed from having a generalized understanding of what you should and should not do, but the legality behind the decision-making process made her uneasy as a brand-new teacher.

Patrick, although having several years of experience teaching before starting his program, also discussed how law courses impacted his way of thinking:

After I took law I walked into the gym one time and there were like 180 kids in there and only two teachers. And I was like 'we are going to get in trouble because we do not have correct supervision over this' ... It definitely opened up me to looking at the school in a different perspective. (Patrick, 2017)

Taking on a new perspective helped Patrick to tackle challenges in the classroom differently. Although confident in his classroom management skills, Patrick was now poised with leadership training that supported his students-first mindset. Interacting with parents, staff, and students was done with a whole new outlook. Patrick's reflective nature, not only on his school law courses, but the others as well, helped him to work on his own leadership qualities while instilling those same qualities in his students. Patrick recalled struggling with leadership citing it as his weakness in the classroom. The more he learned and developed as a leader himself, the more he found himself pushing his students to lead as well.

I think through leadership, I tried to push more. I've always done Kagan groupings, but now I try to build group leaders, to create energy... I tried to build more classroom leaders – having more kids do oral presentations, giving them more opportunities.

(Patrick, 2017)

Viewing teaching and learning through a new lens was different for Gabby and Patrick. Now prepared with the understanding of school law and its impact on administrative decision making, they made changes in their classroom to build leaders who were independent thinkers. Much like Gabby and Patrick, Jennifer, Stephen, and Sydney also used their leadership training to adjust their thinking processes when it came to classroom teaching and leading others.

Stephen and Sydney both discussed using their leadership skills to build relationships with budding professionals. Attaining his master's degree allowed Stephen to mentor new teachers, so while he was not immediately able to apply knowledge from his coursework into his fifth-grade class, he was able to use his new knowledge base to mentoring student teachers and first-year teachers. He recalled the opportunity his degree provided him:

I was able to supervise student teachers... It was very rewarding because I could see that I was helping them out. I felt that I could use those skills that I'd learned as an administrator... Also, at the time, I was mentoring brand new teachers... I could go in and observe them... and give them feedback on what they've done. Then they would have their formal with the administrator...I was sort of able to fulfill that administrative role without the title. (Stephen, 2018)

Stephen's last statement, fulfilling the role without the title, sums up his takeaways from his degree program. Although he enjoyed the learning and the interaction with adults and guiding their professional growth, he realized that administration was not for him.

I love teaching. I love what I'm doing... You learn it as you teach. It's not like being a doctor, where you have all those years of training. You learn also as you go along, but the main things you learn for education, you don't really learn until you're actually doing it! (Stephen, 2018)

He shared that he enjoys being able to take on administrative tasks still, without the pressure that administrators face. He took what he learned at the time and tucked it away and now uses that administrative knowledge to help mentor teachers and colleagues.

Like the others, Sydney found ways to use her educational administration training in her classroom. With adult students often in her classroom, Sydney's leadership development courses helped her to better understand their needs:

I continued to act as a cooperating teacher and mentor and applied all that I was learning in the college classroom about the actions of a school leader and the shift from thinking like a teacher... I believed in my program and felt very well prepared to lead other educators. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney shared that during and after her program she was confident that she could apply her knowledge to her teacher-leader role and not long after completing her program, into her role as a school administrator.

I consistently applied what I was learning in my coursework to what I was doing in my own classroom, as well as in my work as a teacher leader. I believe that application was the reason my transition from a teacher to a school administrator was as seamless as it was. I cannot say it was easy, but I can say with certainty that the transition seemed natural. (Sydney, 2017)

She used that opportunity to grow as a professional and to broaden her educational understanding in order to lead other teachers and students on a larger scale. Her application of knowledge created experiential learning opportunities that served as the foundation for her future.

### **Bringing It All Together: Course to Classroom Connections**

In this study, participants had the opportunity to be working in a situation where most teacher-scholars were able to complete field work and study within their own classrooms. The ability to bring their coursework into their career was shown to be beneficial to both the teacher-scholars and their students. Applying management and instructional strategies that were learned via discussion and coursework in classrooms provided teacher-scholars the concrete opportunities to implement, reflect, and experiment with alternative strategies when things did not provide the desired results.

Teacher-scholars focusing more on leadership reported that their courses may not have directly aligned with their teaching but were still applicable to their job performance. Their new knowledge impacted the way they approached situations, spoke with parents and colleagues, and caused additional opportunities for reflection and scholarly conversations with others already in

leadership positions. Connections from course to career also allowed teacher-scholars on the school leadership path to share their learning with their own school leaders and to take on smaller leadership roles on their campus in order to gain additional experience with working with other adults through professional development or the leading of teacher-based committees.

**Theme 7: “It validated the feeling that I had that I’m an educated person  
and I’m moving forward in life.”**

After stress, anxiety, schedule adjustments, family struggles and challenges, long days, and many, many papers and readings, all of the participants completed their master’s degrees and began making preparations for their futures. Several participants chose to stay in the classroom and await the next opportunity that came their way. For some, school administration was on the horizon. Others prepared for moves out of the classroom; teacher support roles became a part of their reality. Regardless of their decisions after graduation, all participants agreed that they were glad to be finished with their master’s degree and looked forward to the things to come.

**Currently Classroom Teachers**

For teacher-scholars Stephen, Shantell, and Kristine, the classroom is where they are most happy. Now holders of master’s degrees, they are putting their advanced degrees to work through hands-on teaching with in their classrooms. Although future moves into other roles are not out of the question, they are each content in their own classrooms for now and do not have immediate plans to seek out other options at this time.

**Stephen.** Stephen completed his master’s degree program in the Fall of 2012. At the time of data collection, he was celebrating five years since receiving his degree and coming to a realization that would direct the future of his career. Not long after Stephen graduated, an opportunity came for him to move from his fifth-grade classroom to ESL. Although Stephen was

thrilled that he had succeeded in his program, he realized that school administration would never be his passion. He enjoyed the students and the classroom more than he ever thought possible.

Stephen is now in his 26th year of teaching and plans to retire from his position as an ESL teacher. The pressures on today's school administrators is more than Stephen wished to deal with. Instead he puts his leadership skills to use as his school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Coordinator and serves as a member of his school's leadership team. Stephen offers this advice to students considering higher education, "Know what you want. Even if you're not in your twenties and you're still trying to figure things out, really think about what you want to do with your degree." He added that perhaps he did not really know himself when he began his master's program, yet he has no regrets. He also encourages students, of all ages, to remember that "if you think you know, and then you change your mind later, it's okay to change your mind."

**Kristine.** Kristine completed her master's degree program in 2015. Like Stephen, she has chosen to stay in her third-grade classroom and does not wish to pursue other options for advancement at this time. "It felt amazing to finally get my degree... Now I can proudly say that I have my master's," she recalled.

Kristine credits her master's program with solidifying her beliefs in hard work, "At times it was very difficult, but it also helped to teach me to never give up." Kristine reminds herself of that every day as she teaches her students. Kristine's success has helped her grow on not only a professional level, but also personally. Learning will always be a part of her outlook on life and on goal setting. Kristine often contemplates what is next for her in her career. She has been teaching middle school students during a summer enrichment program. She enjoys teaching older students and hopes to one day move into a fifth or sixth grade classroom. After teaching

second grade early on in her career, she shared that she doubts she will ever teach students that young again. She enjoys the independence of older students and felt like the younger children were not a good fit for her teaching style and personality.

Kristine is the only participant in the study who shared that if she chose to return to higher education, she would seek a different career field altogether. While she enjoys teaching, she desires a more “freeing” career. In the meantime, she plans to continue teaching third grade and would be willing to make a move to teach physical education if the opportunity became available at her school.

**Shantell.** Although she graduated in the fall of 2017, Shantell is already putting her knowledge to good use in her classroom. Feeling as though she has “come a long way,” she feels more prepared for every day happenings in her classroom. Specifically, she said that she’s “ready to conquer the world.” Although she may be ready to conquer the world, her world for the time being is limited to her school site. She has developed strong mentor bonds with some of her former students. Shantell feels very connected to those students and they seek her for advice, calming conversation when they face adversity and simply for a shoulder to cry on when necessary. “I feel like I’m a support system for them so I would surely hate to yank that sense of stability away from them. I just feel like I’m not ready to make any moves right now,” she explained.

For now, Shantell continues to teach second grade, direct the school choir, and is highly involved with both her church and her sorority. Her dedication to serving others and her commitment to her students and her learning has helped her to see a new direction in her career. Since completing her fieldwork with students whose first language was not English, she has developed an interest in English language learners and plans to return to higher education to seek



that certification. “I also plan to get my certification in ESL and decide whether I want to go the ESL route or the reading coach route. Whatever I decide, I want to do it and step out on fate” (Shantell, 2017). Shantell shared that when she does decide to “step out on fate” and pursue the courses necessary for the add-on certification, she will not return to an online degree or certification program. She explained,

I would rather do either an on-campus or hybrid program. I don’t want to do it all online again. It all goes with what I’ve learned about myself as a learner. I learn better from interaction. Not that we didn’t interact online but it’s not the same to interact with someone through a computer rather than in-person. I think I learn best through immediate interaction with others. (Shantell, 2017)

As of now, Shantell feels ready to pursue her next challenge when time is right. She is happy where she is in her career but intends to spend some time refining her teaching skills and focusing on her personal life.

### **Looking Towards Administration**

Teacher-scholars Patrick, Karen, Gabby, and Bryan are all currently still classroom teachers but are patiently awaiting an opportunity to enter school administration. Although they are all happy in their current positions, they have either interviewed for or will be interviewing for leadership roles in the near future.

**Patrick.** When Patrick completed his master’s degree program in the summer of 2015, he was thrilled. He did not, however, enter the administration track for his school district. Determined to get more experience as a classroom teacher before venturing out, Patrick felt that timing was not right for him to take on a new role. Patrick was not ready to become an

administrator at that point in his career but he did share some of the thought process behind where he is headed in his career:

If I see another teacher is struggling, I'm always willing to get in there and help them. It's difficult. It's not an easy job. And some day, that's hopefully the role I'll be in. I don't want to be the police officer administrator that goes in there, 'Oh, you're doing this wrong.' I'm not trying to get you. You're there to coach; you're there to make them better. The field is not producing enough educators as it is... Who we've got is who we've got. So, we've got to try to get everyone to be better. (Patrick, 2017)

High selection standards and a widening pool of potential administrators vying for very few spaces makes Patrick worry and wonder if he missed his opportunity by not entering the administration track immediately following his graduation. Although he has applied and interviewed for positions, he has yet to get one outside of the classroom. He expressed his only point of regret:

I could kick myself because at year 9 [teaching], when I came out [of the master's program], I was like I don't want to be an administrator. Now, I don't want to be an administrator yet, but I'm afraid if I don't get in at some point, I may never get in there.

Patrick is still very content in his teaching position and although school administration is not where he wants to be at this point in his career, if something came about for him, he would take it. Patrick shared that if the opportunity presented itself to go into a district position requiring additional certifications, he would return to higher education to achieve those credentials. However, financially, Patrick is finished with higher education unless it is either required for a career move or if it was funded by an outside source.

**Karen.** When Karen finished her master's degree in the spring of 2012, she had no immediate plans for making a move out of the classroom. Little did she know, however, that change was on the horizon. Karen taught for a few more years and began to explore options that would help her to increase her financial stability after retirement. After consulting with colleagues experiencing a similar situation, she decided to return to higher education to work on an add-on certification in educational leadership. After teaching in the classroom for over twenty years, Karen began working as a reading interventionist in the school's reading lab.

The reading lab provided Karen with a flexible schedule making her available to work on additional leadership tasks beyond those she was able to do while still teaching in the classroom. She was able to take a more active role on the school leadership team and became a part of the schools' Response to Intervention team that would assist with assessing students who exhibited needs. While Karen worked on her certification program, she was able to log her internship hours during her workday and was able to shadow school administrators regularly. The opportunity was perfect timing for Karen's career goals at the time.

Karen completed her add-on certification in school leadership in the spring of 2017 and has interviewed for multiple positions since then and feels that having that practice has been beneficial to her future. After interviewing, Karen realized that each school had some different school-specific criteria that they were looking to fill. Although she thought each interview would prepare her for the next, she saw that was not the case and she did not have the experience administrators were looking for. Karen returned to her school and her reading lab in the fall and began to take a more direct approach to the leadership team: asking for opportunities to work on things, taking notes and questioning practices, familiarizing herself with documents and processes. "I just came back with a different mindset of just really becoming more familiar with

everything.” This coming summer Karen plans to apply and interview again, this time armed with information and experience that she did not have before. She hopes of achieving a position as an academic dean or assistant principal. And if that does not happen, she would love to re-enter the classroom, “I like being in the lab, but I guess I’ve just kind of had enough. The only good thing about being there right now is that I’m accessible to leadership opportunities. But I miss classroom teaching.”

**Gabby.** Completing her master’s degree in the summer of 2016 gave Gabby a sense of pride that she was able to be the first person in her family to not only obtain a college degree, but also an advanced degree. Her pride can be summed up by a simple gesture that meant a lot to her:

Putting that M.Ed. behind my name on my school email address felt awesome. Just knowing I had the same credentials as my administrators, even though I still have a lot to learn, was just reassuring that one day, I will make it there. (Gabby, 2018)

Gabby is currently in her fourth year as a first-grade teacher. Although she plans to apply for a position in school administration, she feels that she still needs more classroom experience before making the leap to assist principal or principal.

I want at least five years in the classroom, and I still feel like that even is not enough for people to not only take me seriously, but to respect me. Right now, there’s no way that I could apply for a leadership role. (Gabby, 2018)

Like Jennifer, Gabby feels that right now she would be seen as too young or too inexperienced to effectively lead a school. Her plan is to apply for administrative positions after completing her fifth year of classroom teaching.

**Bryan.** When Bryan finished his master's degree in the Spring of 2015 he gained a confidence that he did not previously have, "Confidence for myself and also in front of my peers," he explained. With that confidence came a renewed sense of purpose and the willpower to continue even further in his education and his career. He immediately returned to the collegiate classroom, seeking a specialist's degree focusing on educational administration. Although he now has his degrees to show that he has completed the coursework, he feels that the degree does not define the professional. He plans to continue learning and developing to earn the experience that goes with the title:

I like having the capability to advance. ... Having the ability to apply knowledge at your workplace builds confidence. I've had to do a lot of internship hours and work with my school to develop as a leader. They gave me more responsibilities. (Bryan, 2017)

Having those additional responsibilities is what is pushing Bryan to continue learning from professionals around him and pushes him to continue reaching for a position in school administration.

Bryan is currently teaching physical education at a local elementary school. He serves on his school's leadership team as the school disciplinarian and is currently applying and interviewing for careers outside of the classroom in both elementary and middle schools. His goal is to get a position as an academic dean in the near future. Unfortunately, time is holding Bryan back. Before Bryan can take on an administrative role in his district, he must complete three years of certified teaching. Due to Bryan's late start in education, he will only have completed one full year of certified teaching in the state by the end of the 2017-2018 school year. Although he has several years of teaching experience total, the time spent in the private school and overseas in Korea, do not count towards the experience needed to seek a permanent

certificate for a school leader. In the meantime, he continues to research and better himself as a professional while staying abreast of any openings in teacher support or student support roles at the administrative levels.

### **Teacher to Administrator**

Tony and Sydney wasted no time moving from classroom teacher to school leader. After completing their master's degrees, they both began exploring options that would allow them to advance in their careers as quickly as possible.

**Tony.** After completing his master's degree in 2013, Tony felt an "extreme sense of pride." He recalled how his completion gave the validation he had been looking for:

I felt that I had put something under my belt that strengthened my own sense of accomplishment and personal value, just because I have such a strong value for education. It validated the feeling that I had that I am an educated person, and I'm moving forward in life. It was a huge milestone for me. (Tony, 2017)

After graduation, he reached another milestone, Tony finally landed what he thought would be his dream job: teaching French at a local high school. Over the course of the school year Tony realized that the position he had longed for, was not for him. By replacing his master's coursework and busyness with a new school, new subject, and new living arrangements, Tony never got the chance to settle back into a good place with his home life. Life was still stressful and full of tension. Even through the stress, Tony's wife encouraged him to continue to pursue the education he dreamed of and with her support, he entered a Ph.D. program in 2016. After being out of school for only one year, he picked up right where he left off – long days, late nights, no time for family, continued stress and struggle. After trying to make their marriage

work, Tony and his wife chose to end their marriage. Though their lives were challenged by Tony's education, he does not attribute his education to the demise of their relationship.

Just a few months ago, Tony left his job teaching French to become a Principal Fellow for a local charter school association and will enter his new role as school principal in the fall of 2018. Tony continues to work towards his Ph.D., and he co-parents his son with his now ex-wife. He has a strong appreciation for her support in his education throughout their marriage. Without her support, he believes that he would not be where he is today, educationally.

**Sydney.** After obtaining her master's degree in educational leadership in 2014, Sydney immediately applied for assistant principal positions in her school district. One semester later she was hired by a local elementary school. She also immediately began teaching as an adjunct professor at her university. She is now in her third year as an assistant principal and continues to serve as an instructor for teacher preparation courses every other semester.

Completing her degree was life-changing for Sydney. After going through a painful divorce and reevaluating her family's needs, completing her degree gave her a new outlook:

Graduation was a sign of hope, perseverance, and strength that no one can ever take away from me. It came at a time when I was forced to rebuild my life, on my own. It was truly a great experience... I am a woman of faith and this journey was definitely part of God's plan for me. (Sydney, 2017)

Sydney is currently happy in her position as an assistant principal and has no plans to leave that role in the near future. She feels that she is where she needs to be, both personally and professionally. Sydney shared that once her son graduates from high school she would consider seeking a principalship. In the meantime, she intends to spend her time continuing to develop professionally and learning all she can to better herself as an administrator. She also hopes to

regain her social life as she has put herself on hold for several years now and is ready to “enjoy life a little more.”

### **Teacher to Teacher Support**

For Jennifer and Renee, school leadership may be on their path but not at this time. Both are currently working in teacher support roles where they have direct impact with teachers and students. Working in teacher support roles gives these women the opportunity to embrace their own backgrounds as teachers and develop their leadership skills in the process. As teacher support personnel they still have the opportunity to impact students and their successes from a different point of view.

**Jennifer.** Soon after Jennifer graduated with her second master’s degree in 2014, she left the classroom and began working as an academic dean in her school. She was able to utilize her administration skills to observe teachers, providing critique and feedback, as well as conduct professional development sessions and professional learning community meetings. She enjoyed that position but when an opportunity to move into a different role in her districts central office, she applied and was hired mid-year. She now works in federal funding and serves teachers and students in a very different role. Although Jennifer is very happy in her current position, she does not count out moving into school administration in her future. For now, however, she feels as if her age is holding her back:

I think what holds me back is my age. People value years of experience and age. So, I feel for me, this is my tenth year in the school system. I’m in my early thirties. I don’t think that people would take me as seriously maybe as someone else who has more years of experience who is older. (Jennifer, 2017)



Even with the career changes after receiving her second master's degree, Jennifer was ready to take on yet another degree. Jennifer felt as if she was not finished with her learning and she still sought to be as marketable in the field as possible. Jennifer is currently working through her last semesters of her doctoral program and will receive her Ph.D. in Educational Administration within the next year. After she completes her doctoral studies, she considers returning to add additional certifications to her teaching certificate and ultimately, when timing is right, returning to the school setting as an assistant principal or possibly a principal.

**Renee.** Renee concluded her master's degree program in 2014. She recalled her emotions at that time, "Turning in the final case study was a relief. I was very proud of my accomplishments. This [master's diploma] is the only certificate I display in my house. When I look at it I feel a sense of pride." Since then she has been hard at work developing herself as a teacher and a teacher leader. After teaching for another year, she was offered an opportunity to move into a teacher support role. The decision to leave the classroom was an easy one for her:

I saw many great teachers but I also saw many teachers who were not using best practices so I felt like even though I was a decent math teacher, I would be in a better position to help other math teachers and that would allow me to have a greater impact on more kids.  
(Renee, 2017)

Renee left her fifth grade classroom to take on an instructional coach position at the same school. After working in that role for a year, she transferred to a specialized school in her district where she could provide more focused teacher support on mathematics and technology use in the classroom.

Renee shared that she enjoyed her experiences in higher education yet those experiences put her in student loan debt. She acknowledged that if money were no option, she would

definitely return to higher education to pursue a doctoral degree. Currently she is continuing her professional advancement by completing internship hours and preparing to take the Louisiana Licensure Assessment to add-on a certification to be a school administrator. She is happy in her current position but sees school administration in her near future.

### **Bringing It All Together: A Journey Completed**

All eleven of the participants completed their journey successfully and earned their master's degree. Their feelings of joy, pride, and accomplishment were shared and can be seen through their continued work in education. Each of the participants have achieved their goals and are making plans to continue their learning through professional development and on-going learning opportunities. Some participants have already entered the field of school administration and teacher support while others are very happy in their teaching jobs and do not have immediate plans to make any changes. Those participants who have chosen to continue their formal education beyond their master's degree are working with the same amount of dedication and perseverance and expect to complete another educational endeavor in the near future.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlighted the experiences of eleven teachers from the Greater New Orleans area who concurrently pursued higher education while tackling a full-time teaching career. Recollections of experiences often reflected similarities in experiences and also uncovered nuances that individualized each person's educational journey. Seven themes emerged from the data and those themes were used to display the data in relation to participant experiences across data sets. While most themes were independent of each other, themes three and four, encompassing teacher-scholar motivation and teacher-scholar support systems, showed significant overlap. Although these themes individually represent separate parts of the teacher-

scholar experience, a close relationship was discovered between the motivation and drive to continue in the master's degree programs and the support from loved ones and friends.

Participants expressed that the support shown through encouragement and expressions of admiration and pride influenced their motivation to continue and excel within their respective programs. At the completion of data collection and analysis, all eleven participants were still working in field of education and expressed a desire to continue building their professional experiences through professional development, collaboration, formal education, and reflective teaching practices.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursued graduate studies and to understand how adult learning provides opportunities for personal growth and the attainment of professional goals. The guiding question for this study was: *What are the personal and professional experiences of classroom teachers who have concurrently pursued a master's degree in Education?* Further discussion in this chapter highlights how participants and their experiences relate to the previous research, the theoretical framework, and the research question that guided the study. Limitations and recommendations for continued research are also included.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The topics of teachers, adult education, adult learners, experiential learning, and higher education have been widely studied over the last thirty years (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002; Beaudin, 1993; Boutsiouki, 2010; DeAngelis, 2013; Delors, 1996; Ellis, 2000, Eyler, 2009; Istane, Schuetze, & Schuller, 2002; Joseph, 2015; Kelaher-Young & Carter, 2013; Knowles, 1962, 1980, 1990; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Kolb, 1981, 1984, 1984, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2008; Korth, Erickson, & Hall, 2009; Kosnik et. al, 2011; Marriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Moore, 2010; Ozder, 2011; Pham, 2012; Tinto, 2012; Van Manen, 1991; West, 2013). However, examining working professionals who concurrently pursue education has not received much research attention. Through interviews and focus group discussions, participants shared their feelings and experiences through their careers and their lives over the course of the time it took to pursue a master's degree in education.

These findings emerged from the data: 1) Teacher-scholars returned to higher education for various reasons most notably seeking to improve their teaching practices, seeking a natural continuation of formal education after completing an undergraduate degree, and seeking to develop greater marketability in the field of education. 2) Teacher-scholars experienced a vast array of emotions, challenges, successes, and setbacks, in both their personal and professional lives, during the period of time spent as a concurrent teacher and higher education student. 3) Teacher-scholar motivation stems from intrinsic desires for self-directed, self-accomplished learning and extrinsic motivators of creating better lives for themselves, their families and their students. 4) Teacher-scholars relied on emotional and professional support from their family and friends, university professors and program mentors, and administration and colleagues at their school sites. 5) Teacher-scholars used reflection as a tool for improving and self-assessing their professional practice as well as a way to reinforce decision-making in both their personal and professional lives. 6) Teacher-scholars' master's program coursework provided concrete and reflective learning experiences that impacted their success as teachers and helped to enhance professional qualities that would aid in career advancement later in their careers. 7) Teacher-scholars' completion of their advanced degree programs provided closure to a period of life full of opportunities, experiences that created awareness to many career possibilities available to teachers who hold master's degrees.

The findings of this study were consistent with those discovered in a pilot study conducted in 2015 and a similar study conducted by O'Connor and Cordova (2010) in business education. In the 2010 study, researchers determined that participants entered a master's degree program in order to pursue future advancements in their career. This is consistent with the findings from the current study however unlike the Cordova and O'Connor study, some

participants chose not to immediately seek a change from their teaching career due to contentment in their current positions and the availability, or lack thereof, of positions in the career path they wish to explore. The current study on teacher-scholars also showed striking similarities to the O'Connor and Cordova in relation to students' perceptions of their own abilities and high expectations and self-determined nature of their learning endeavors as participants in both studies expressed that they were directly in charge of their own learning and direction for professional growth. Both studies also concluded that support systems were paramount to success however in the current study, workplace support was a large part of the teacher-scholar support systems while in the O'Connor and Cordova study, researchers cited that their participants felt that support in their workplace was limited.

Another similarity in the findings of the two studies surrounds the participants' ability to balance life, work, and education. While this subject came up in the interviews and focus group discussions in the current study, O'Connor and Cordova cited difficulty for participants to balance all of their responsibilities. While it posed challenges for participants in the current study, they were able to schedule, organize, and prioritize so that they were able to manage their needs in order to keep from becoming overwhelmed or burnt-out. Both studies highlighted the importance of active learning being applicable in the career fields as well as developing a sense of marketability for future career advancement. The O'Connor and Cordova (2010) study and the current study on teacher-scholars in the field of education represent the results of higher education students in the two most sought-after master's degree programs of all career fields utilizing the Graduate Record Examination as a factor in program admission. The findings of these two studies conclude that while it is difficult, often stressful, and challenging, the benefits of engaging in formal education to obtain a professional degree was worth the sacrifice and

struggle in order to become better equipped to take on future career opportunities to enhance career success.

### **Connecting Data to Theoretical Framework**

The why and the how teacher-scholars managed their careers and their lives while working and learning concurrently were the key foundations that this study was designed to highlight. Andragogy and Experiential Learning Theory served as lenses through which the learners' experiences were examined. By examining all aspects of the learner's journey and reliving their experiences through their voices and their words, their stories were told, highlighting challenges and struggle, success and defeat. Knowles' andragogical assumptions were compared to the experiences of the eleven participants and while some remained true, some show room for update with the evolution of education over the last several decades. Through these experiences, Knowles' andragogical assumptions were compared and while some remained true for the eleven participants, some show room for update with the evolution of education over the last several decades. Experiential Learning Theory and David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle were also reviewed and compared to the participant experience and then recommendations were made to improve the cycle to reflect the actual processes of the teacher-scholar participants.

### **Andragogy**

Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn." Researchers (Chan, 2010; Harris, 2003; Moore, 2010; Peterson & Ray, 2013; Taylor & Kroth, 2009) over the last twenty years referred to Knowles and his colleagues to systematically define the way adults learn. In his work, Knowles defined six andragogical assumptions that researchers agreed were present in adult learning across multiple disciplines. The following section discusses how the learning of the participants in this study relate to the assumptions.

**The need to know.** Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) concluded that the need to know stemmed from the learner's understanding of a topic, citing that prior to learning something new, it must be determined why the learning is necessary. Teacher-scholars expressed their need to learn in theme one. The need to learn stemmed from the participants' reasoning for returning to higher education. Six of the eleven teacher-scholars discussed their need for learning in terms of what they felt they needed to be able to do in their classrooms to feel more successful and effective as educators. As Shantell expressed, "I have noticed that the students these days just don't learn how to read... I really wanted to learn other strategies to really help my students learn how to read." Renee shared a similar need for learning, "I needed to learn new strategies for not only teaching, but for management and engagement as well. I knew there was so much that I hadn't tried."

For the remaining five teacher-scholars, developing leadership skills in order to one day become effective school administrators was the catalyst for their need to learn. Sydney shared her need for learning, stemming from her prior experience working with adults, "Working as a teacher leader and cooperating teacher inspired me to seek a degree that would allow me to work directly with adults, in a leadership capacity." On multiple occasions participants discussed learning methods and strategies for teaching during their master's programs and how professors shared ways to use them to support learning and communication thus implying a need to know and providing an application for the learning, however the "need to know" in the case of this study was more in the hands of the learner rather than the facilitator. In many cases in this research, the teacher-scholar was the facilitator of the learning as they cited learning through their hands-on experiences more often than text or theory-based instruction.



While many teacher-scholars expressed that they were self-directed in their learning, Kristine's evaluation of her own learning accurately represented a point where she felt as if she was facilitating her own learning through hands-on experiences rather than developing theoretical background knowledge, "Although the information I learned was beneficial, the best way to learn about content and teaching is by getting experience in actual classrooms. That's when everything really started to make sense to me." The experiential aspect of Kristine's learning gave her the autonomy to direct her own knowledge as it related to her classroom and her own needs as a learner rather than a fictitious scenario that was discussed on an on-line discussion board. The participants in this study found that their need to know was a supporting catalyst to their ultimate success in the master's programs and as a result, they took control of their learning. As Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) conclude, the need to know helps learners to see the gaps "between where they are now and where they want to be."

**The learner's self-concept.** All participants in this study referred to themselves either as self-directed learners or with a synonymous description. Prior to entering their master's degree programs, participants developed their self-concept as being responsible for their own learning which allowed them to take ownership of their learning style and processes throughout their teacher-scholar journey. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) assert that:

Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. They resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them. (p. 65)

The learners' self-concept and their individual drive to learn and grow as professionals was illustrated through the data in themes one and two. Participant stories of how they came to be a

higher education student and the journey they had throughout their experiences showed their desire to take charge in their education, regardless of barriers they may have faced. Jennifer's self-concept as a lifelong learner was expressed when she discussed how she decided to go back to school so quickly after her undergraduate degree, "It's important to continue to improve my education...there was no reason not to... I just knew that I needed to keep learning and growing and I was in charge of how I did that." While Knowles et. al (1998) discussed that adult learners may tend to resort to a dependent, "teach me" attitude when put into a situation that does not align with the learner's immediate goals or direction, among the eleven interviewed participants new learning opportunities were welcomed as they came rather than being seen as unnecessary. Patrick's stance towards district-assigned professional development, however, does illuminate how the "teach me" attitude could be present when the learning is not learner-selected, "... if I have to go to a professional development... maybe that I'm not self-directed on, I better learn something. If I don't... then it was not worth my time." In the case of participant learning opportunities discussed in this study, while all tasks did not always directly align with the learners' self-selected needs, participants viewed the learning as valuable although some experiences proved to be more worthwhile and meaningful to them than others.

**The role of the learner's experience.** Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) explain, "Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from youths." In essence, having lived longer, they have a larger bank of experiences from which to compare their new experiences. This assumption of how experience impacts their learning implies that "a greater emphasis in adult education is placed on individualization of teaching and learning strategies" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998, p. 66). This assumption can be viewed through all themes in this research study. Every aspect of the learners'

experiences helped to develop when and how knowledge was acquired and how that learning may have been individualized based on the prior experiences each teacher-scholar had before their master's programs. Many participants cited being tasked with opportunities to go out into the field and work directly with students other than their own, thus providing information-rich experiences from which to create context for their learning.

Shantell recalled using her experiences as an elementary teacher to enhance her teaching with high school E.S.L. students, "I don't know if she really didn't know how to speak English well however a lot of things that I was doing with my second graders actually worked well for her..." In that same experience, Shantell also realized that her field experiences in high school ESL caused her to venture from her comfort zone and impact learners in a different way. In turn, she realized that this would be an avenue worth exploring when she is ready to leave the primary classroom. Her experience is a prime example of how participants were able to impart their own background knowledge and previous life experiences to enhance not only their learning of the pedagogical or andragogical content but also to build on their own professional learning.

**Readiness to learn.** Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) cite that adults become ready to learn the things they need to know and be able to do in order cope effectively with their real-life situations. A critical attribute of this andragogical assumption is the importance of timing in the learning experiences. In the case of this research, participants referred to the timing of their educational endeavors in two ways: life-centered and career-centered. Their readiness to learn is evidenced in themes one, two, three, and six, in relation to the timing of their programs and the effectiveness of their learning. For teacher-scholars like Sydney, her readiness to learn was life-centered, stemming from her need to excel in her career field to reach financial independence for her family. For others, like Shantell, Renee, and Kristine, their readiness to learn came from the

realization that they each exhibited weaknesses in their own instructional capabilities and in order to provide their students with strategic instruction to meet their needs, they as teachers, needed to improve their knowledge and instructional strategies by means of higher education. Teacher-scholars reported the timing of their educational journey and their readiness to learn as being necessary at the phase of their career and in the proper timeframe for the knowledge to be professionally and personally beneficial. In this case, the results of this study agree Knowles' assumption that readiness can be induced through necessity, performance, and career development.

**Orientation to learning.** Research on the andragogical model (Knowles, 1962, 1980, 1990; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998) describes adult motivations and orientations to learning being more life-, task-, or problem-centered therefore the need to learn is situational. Knowles et. al (1998) specifically express that “adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations.” Adults expect that new knowledge is applicable to real-life situations. In the case of this research, participants also expected that their learning would be related to their career development, whether in the classroom or in an advanced capacity as teacher support personnel or a school administrator. The teacher-scholars' orientations to learning were evidenced in themes five and six where they shared their experiences through reflections and connecting their coursework to their work in their classrooms and professional experiences.

Most participants disclosed that their learning was not only presented in terms of how it could be used in real-life applications in their career but they were also immediately able to implement their learning in their classrooms or with others under their mentorship. Gabby expressed that her higher education journey began as a life-centered learning endeavor, “in order

for me to teach out of state, I needed a master's degree." Although it started life-centered with the necessity being a here and now plan to move north to teach, her orientation for learning shifted as she got further in her program after her life situation changed. Developing her leadership skills and administrative qualities became a more task-centered learning experience for Gabby as she began to realize how her learning would help her to develop as a professional and future school leader, "... being a teacher and going to graduate school, I was educated more... I felt it opened doors for me... I shared with my colleagues and my administration knew that I was working on improving myself and as a teacher." Tony's experiences were more problem centered early on in his career. After struggling with classroom management and being resistant to trying recommendations from his university mentor, he reluctantly took her advice and filmed his teaching. Afterwards he was able to view himself and pinpoint opportunities for growth which highlighted specific aspects of his presence in the classroom that could have affected the challenges he was experiencing. After viewing himself teaching, he was able to address the problems he perceived in his classroom and act on them in more effective ways as a result of what he learned about himself as a teacher.

For Stephen, Sydney, and Jennifer, although the learning was not always immediately applicable in their classroom, when opportunity arose where the leadership knowledge they had gained became useful, their learning was confirmed through active experiences of administration-style actions and conversations that took place during or after their programs but outside of the classroom setting. Having a career-focused orientation to learning allowed all of the participants to gain and retain knowledge that impacted their careers both at the time of the learning and in the future as they advance in their years of experience or in various positions within the field of education.

**Motivation.** Motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, impacts the adult learner's response to knowledge acquisition. However, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) share that the "most potent motivators" are intrinsic motivators such as self-direction, excellence in career, self-esteem, and quality of life. This was noted in the data collected from all participants as outlined in theme three. Although several different external factors aided in motivation, each participant expressed a high-level of intrinsic and personal motivation to succeed in not only their degree programs but as an educator as well. High personal expectations of self were top motivators for the participants. Shantell expressed expectations for herself, even criticizing herself, "I have very high expectations for myself... I often push myself too hard... I try to do my best and don't accept anything else... I try hard to balance, I really try to balance everything." Sydney shared Shantell's high expectations of self, also noting that she was motivated to succeed because so much of her life was riding on her success, "I already had many profound responsibilities for which my dedication was required... I was completely responsible for my education and my success or failure in the process."

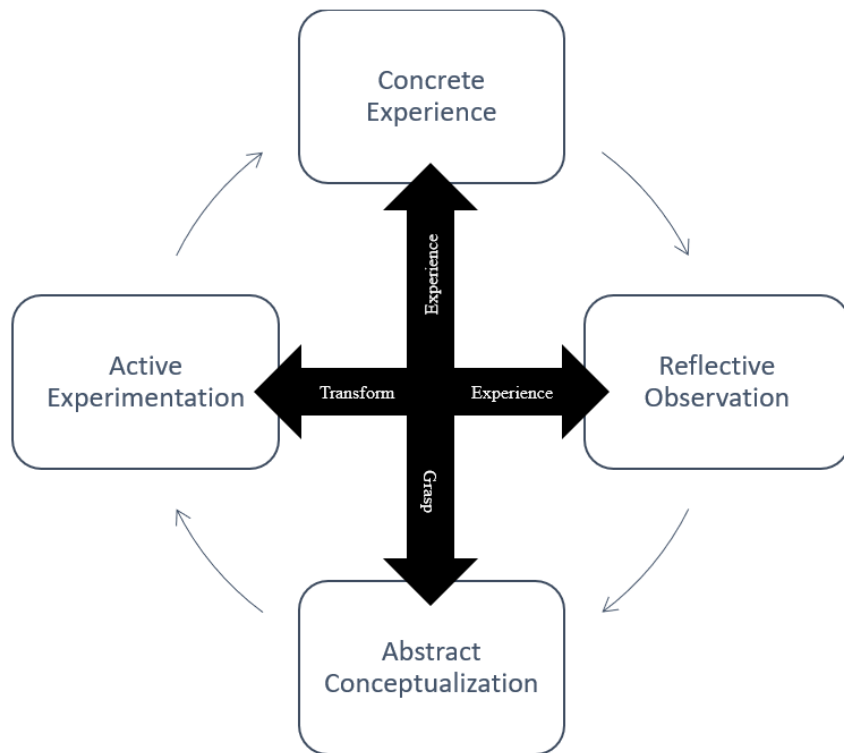
Secondary motivators included family support, financial gains, and potential career advancement. Several participants related their motivation to the support they received from family, friends, and colleagues, sharing that their belief in the teacher-scholar provided motivation to push through the struggles and challenges. Kristine shared that her parents were her "biggest cheerleaders" and their motivation was "encouraging and supportive" when she was struggling or felt overwhelmed and frustrated. Bryan and Renee both shared a similar motivational experience of focusing on their education in an effort to move beyond the "blue collar" life they had lived as children and teens. Both discussed how their parents and their lives as vocationally trained manual laborers, impacted the way they viewed success. Motivation to

create a better life for themselves was intrinsic in terms of seeking better for themselves and breaking away from the financial barriers they faced as children and young adults.

After examining the six andragogical assumptions, it is evident that these assumptions still hold merit with adult learners engaging in higher education even decades after their development. Although learners over the past thirty years have adapted to changing times and expectations, the underlying processes of adult learning have not varied extensively. Self-direction, motivation, and the importance of learning being applicable and meaningful are just as important to today's learners as they were to adult learners decades ago, if not more, given the self-guided inclination in today's modern adult learners.

### **Experiential Learning**

A key factor in the learning for the teacher-scholar participants were the experiences that formulated their knowledge acquisition. In the case of these teachers, learning opportunities could have happened in formal educational experiences, fieldwork observations, or hands-on applications in the classroom. Teacher-scholar participants recognized that the varied experiences had differing impacts on their learning based on how applicable the knowledge was to their everyday teaching at the time. Teacher-scholar participants reflected on their experiences in conjunction with David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015), pictured in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (updated 2015)<sup>5</sup>**

As designed, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015) depicts a broad view of learning through a cyclical design where learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb D. A., 2015). In the 2015 update to his work from the 1980s and 1990s, Kolb added the arrow indicators showing how adult learners use experiences to guide their learning by means of experiencing, then grasping understanding and transforming understanding through experimentation. Concrete experience and reflective observation are said to provide experiential context for learning. Grasping refers to the "process of taking in information" (2015) and transforming the experience to interpret and learn from the experience itself. Kolb (2015) simplified the descriptors of experiential learning to experiencing (concrete

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<sup>5</sup> KOLB, DAVID A., **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: EXPERIENCE AS THE SOURCE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**, 2<sup>nd</sup>, ©2015. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.



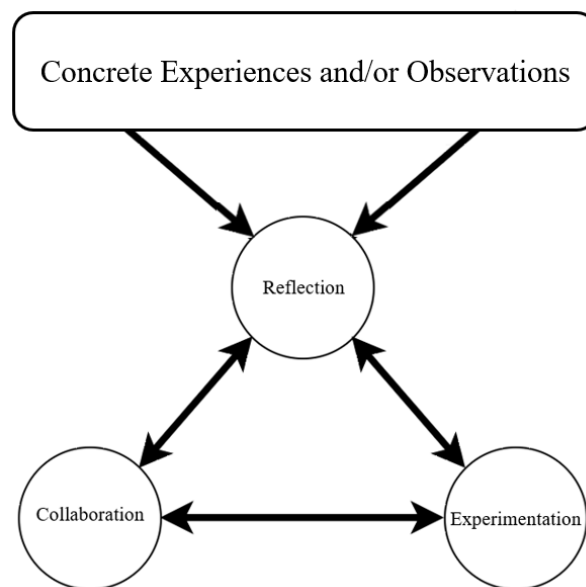
experience), reflecting (reflective observation), thinking (abstract conceptualization), and acting (active experimentation).

Participants discussed various aspects of their learning, which could be correlated to different parts of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle throughout the data collection process. Most often, their experiences highlighted learning new strategies, implementing them in their classrooms, then reflecting on how well or not so well the strategies worked for their classes. Karen specifically spoke to implementing small group instruction to target her struggling readers. In a focus group conversation, she shared how she remembered learning the benefits of differentiated small groups and literacy-based centers in the first grade classroom. Karen referred to her running of small groups and centers as greatly experimental, "...you have a few that may flow just right... then there's that one where it's just not productive." That unproductive center became a huge learning experience for Karen, one that she would revisit regularly throughout her career. Having to adjust center activities, groups, and tasks, made her own learning strengthen each time she had to make adjustments. "Sometimes I would try something then realize it worked for almost everyone... and I began to anticipate challenges. It made me reflect on what the individual groups needed." That point of reflection sparked Karen's ideas for experimenting with different styles of center rotation, different planning of tasks, and different groupings in order to make her small group and center time more effective. "A lot of times I'd talk with other teachers, find out what they were doing and make changes based on what was working for them. If that didn't work, I'd try something new... Just keep going until something clicked." Collaborating with other teachers gave Karen new ideas to try. Following every opportunity for experimentation, she reflected about the effectiveness. After many trials, she eventually developed a system that she could manage in her classroom successfully.

Karen wasn't the only teacher who discussed trying things over and over again to get it right. Jennifer also elaborated on working through her own cycle of learning to teach fourth grade students long division. "I would teach, then reflect, then change my approach... Then realize that approach didn't work and go back and reflect a little more... Then going over it again with my team asking how the other teachers were teaching the skill helped me to target things I may have missed." In the discussion, Jennifer also shared that if she were using Kolb's Learning Cycle to evaluate her own learning, she would be "bouncing from reflection to conceptualization to experimentation, back and forth. Several times, over several years... Then mixing in collaboration with all of the reflecting and experimenting." As a new teacher at the time, she recalled having to go through a similar cycle each year due to the changing population in her classroom. Although she may have found the perfect strategy to work for her class in one year, the next year she was back at the drawing board, experimenting all over again.

Karen and Jennifer were not alone in wanting to add collaboration into Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Resoundingly, participants felt as if that necessary component to their own learning was missing from his original design. Although focus group participants felt that the cycle adequately represented learning through experience, reflection, and conceptualization, they felt that the next component should be collaboration in conjunction with experimentation, given the nature of education as a socially constructed field. In both focus groups, participants stated that they did not see their learning as so much a cyclical process but one that starts with experience or reflection which prompts thinking related to student and teacher needs. After contemplation, the teacher-scholars were positive that the natural procession of learning would be either collaboration or experimentation and then a back and forth process would follow between continued reflection or thinking, collaboration, and experimentation.

After at-length discussions with focus group participants, the following learning model was developed utilizing input from eight of the eleven participants in the research study. The Teacher-Scholar Experiential Learning Model was designed with the understanding that teacher learners' knowledge acquisition via experiences began with either a concrete experience or an observational experience. From these experiences, teacher-scholars entered a period of reflection which sparked collaboration and experimentation. Jennifer specifically stated, "It's not linear or cyclical at all. You have to circle back to collaboration, reflection and experimentation sometimes to get going forward with your learning and teaching again" (Focus Group 2, 2018). The acts of reflection, experimentation, and collaboration were equally important in the learning process however none represented a standalone part of a cycle but a recurring event that could be visited or revisited as necessary.



**Figure 3: Teacher-Scholar Experiential Learning Process**

After reviewing the participant data multiple times and diagramming their learning processes, the diagram represented in Figure 5.2 was developed to represent the teacher-scholar

learning process. The top section represents the opportunities from which the participants felt they gained initial knowledge: concrete experiences represented by in-the-field, hands-on learning whether in their classroom or working with students during fieldwork, and/or observations completed by observing other classes and teachers or by observing their own students. These opportunities for learning prompted reflection. Reflection varied based on the need for learning. Reflection often surrounded effectiveness of a strategy or reflecting on how to move forward with the lesson or learning. Once participants reached the point of reflection, their learning began to take shape based on the needs of their own learning, or that of their students.

Both collaboration and experimentation are equally feasible next steps in the learning process for adult learners. As the teacher-scholars expressed, after reflecting they would either collaborate with other professionals or engage in some type of experimentation to try to another strategy or option to make their learning more successful or meaningful. As a result of that step, they would either collaborate or reflect, or experiment or reflect. The double-ended arrows on Figure 5.2 represent the options that teacher-scholars expressed in the reflection process showing that reflection is not a singular action, nor is collaboration or experimentation. From any of those three actions, a back and forth continuation can ensue until a conclusion is reached that solidifies the learning to a point where learners are comfortable with moving on to a new experience or feels as if their needs and the needs of their students have been met.

The processes of reflection, collaboration, and experimentation, as seen in Figure 5.2 above, work in conjunction with each other to aid the learner in developing a deeper understanding of their learning based on their lived experiences. This gives equal importance to each of the three components, reflection, collaboration, and experimentation, and allows for them

to be revisited as needed to adjust the learning in order to extend or deepen the understanding based on the experience itself.

The rationale behind their thoughts involved circling back to “implementing and reflecting, making changes, and evaluating how well students improve or not based on instructional strategies... then seeking feedback from peers and colleagues” (Focus Group 1, 2018). Participants in Focus Group 2 agreed that collaboration was a key component in learning from their experiences as classroom teachers citing that “reflection usually happens internally then with others... sharing ideas then testing the outcomes of reflection and collaboration” (Focus Group 2, 2018).

Teacher-scholars also noted that it is important to view each experience or observation as an individual learning opportunity therefore the experience itself serves as the catalyst for learning to take place. Each new experience begins its own learning process prompting reflection, collaboration, and experimentation, however necessary to promote knowledge acquisition to best suit the learner’s need.

### **Learning from Their Experiences**

The nature of the research question—what are the personal and professional experiences of classroom teachers who have concurrently pursued a master’s degree in education—was intentionally open-ended to allow all participants an opportunity to share their story on their terms. Whereas the teacher-scholar’s experiences are the only definitive answers to the questions, their stories shed light on the highs and lows, the whys and the hows, and the good and the bad of being a teacher who concurrently pursues higher education. To tell their experiences while still connecting the meaning behind their thoughts with those of other participants, I intentionally used the participants’ own words to portray their voices. In doing so,

teacher-scholar experiences were presented in conjunction with others while still embracing individualization of each person's experience.

Teacher-scholar participants identified their experiences through descriptive discussion beginning with why they chose to return to higher education at that given point in their career. While some participants were very early in their career and had a definite direction and purpose, other participants were later in their careers, seeking a change of scenery or a career move that would allow them increased compensation. Participants expanded their discussion by sharing what life was like during their time concurrently teaching and taking classes. All participants expressed varied levels of stress, from minor stressors such as getting to class on time to severe stressors causing anxiety, depression, marital strain, and burnout. Although participants experienced periods of stress, they cited that intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning coupled with strong support systems, aided in their ultimate success. The teacher-scholars recalled receiving encouragement and support throughout their journey from three main sources: family and friends, university professors and mentors, and school administrators and colleagues. The necessity for support and encouragement varied for all participants whereas some required more support than others and conversely, some participants had more support available than others.

### **Reflection and Their Experiences**

The participants also shared varied levels of reflectiveness. Some reported starting their programs with very little attention to reflectiveness while others reported a reflective personality even prior to beginning the program. All participants expressed that throughout their programs, they were required to reflect and submit assignments showing their reflection. The teacher-scholars collectively shared that the process of formalized reflection caused them to voluntarily

become more reflective outside of their course assignments. Reflection, as participants described it, served as a large part of the participants' learning acquisition as in most cases, they were able to internalize new knowledge and apply it to their current teaching position immediately. Saric and Steh (2017) posit "Reflection is considered as a basis for professional learning because it enables the learning process in and from the everyday classroom experience of teachers." For some participants seeking educational leadership degrees, the knowledge they gained was not always directed towards their growth in the classroom however it increased their thought processes, reflectiveness, and understanding of administrative decision-making and helped them to develop increased communication skills with their students' parents and their colleagues.

After a thorough review of the participant data related to reflection, it was evident that although the participants felt that they were reflective in their teaching practices, the level of reflection that was expressed was minimal and task driven. Participants described instances that related to immediate gratification and process-oriented reflection such as examining a lesson or teaching strategy to implement in their class, however they did not express deep, global reflection related to the bigger picture of teaching, their careers, or the driving forces behind instructional decision making. Saric and Steh (2017) state that the "central purpose of the critical reflection of our own practice" cannot be overlooked. In order for reflective practice to be effective on a more global scale, educators must go beyond the task-oriented reflection of lesson-to-lesson reflection and being "to look for new solutions and paths, to introduce the changes that contribute to the transformation of the community for a better learning, work and life of all individuals" (Saric & Steh, 2017, p. 72).

On several occasions throughout the various interviews, participants shared that they often reflected after lessons, on the way home, in the shower or in journals, but did not

extensively share the topics of their reflection beyond the process-oriented responses. Given the nature of the teacher-scholars and their self-directed learning, it is likely that although they did not verbalize their levels of reflection, their personal reflections are situational. Many teaching and learning experiences may be able to be improved with a quick fix through a daily reflection but in order for teachers to develop as professionals over time, critical reflection is crucial. Developing a deeper sense of reflection in terms of beliefs and understandings about theory, practice, and student success are necessary to engage the teacher-scholar in continued reflective practice that will help them to develop their own success as an educator rather than simply applying a solution to an individual problem. The participant experiences concluded with their successes in program completion, the next steps in their careers, and by discussing any possible barriers that may be preventing them from advancing in their desired direction in education.

### **Transferability and Trustworthiness**

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of this study could be generalized to a broader context. Transference and replicability of this study would only be applicable in states that do not have a master's degree requirement for teacher certification. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that "the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere" (p. 298). Descriptions and participant voice were used to provide context for the research however the purposeful sample provided a cross-section of only a small group of teachers. Generalizations about the teacher-scholar experience could be possible across different groups of teachers however transferability of the results would likely vary depending on geographic location of school districts and/or university programs as readers would have to compare the research situation to a similar situation to which they are familiar. Merriam (2009) addresses generalizing in qualitative research, "...a small, nonrandom,



purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many,” as was the case in this research study. While the results of this study were consistent with a similar study conducted in business education, it is expected that variations would exist given a wider participant base.

In an effort to minimize threats to the interpretation of participant data, the development of the Teacher-Scholar Learning Model was done with input from eight of the eleven participants during the focus group sessions. After discussing Kolb’s 2015 model at length, participants began to share how the Experiential Learning Cycle (2015) was missing a key component in their learning. In both sessions participants brought up similar ideas for their own learning models. After taking some time to draw out their thoughts, participant models were compared in the individual focus groups and then across the two sessions. All models showed a striking similarity starting with a singular experience or observation the leading into reflection. The final design of the Teacher-Scholar Learning Model was developed based on the collaboration of participants and the combination of their data and drawings.

### **Limitations**

Though special considerations were taken into account for developing this study, limitations still exist. The timing of the study left little room for an extensive participant recruitment phase. Over sixty potential participants were contacted, yet only twelve responded. While they all met the necessary criteria, there was little time to continue searching to find additional participants who may have had increased variation with regards to classroom teaching experience. Among the participants, only one of the identified as a high school teacher during their time as a teacher-scholar. Also, of the initial twelve participants, one was unable to arrange time for interviewing and had to withdraw from the study. Although participants represent

multiple races, genders, years of experience, and programs of study, their experiences alone do not represent the experiences of teachers nationally or even regionally. All teachers in the study were current employees of two prominent school districts in southeastern Louisiana. Experiences of teacher-scholars in school districts in other parts of Louisiana, or other states may very well have differing experiences due to university program design, teacher expectations, and external sources specific to each person. Also, although two participants had minimal experience in high schools, only one of the participants identified as middle or high school teachers at the time of data collection. Experiences for teachers in the middle and high school setting would likely be different than those of elementary teachers given the age of students and the additional requirement of extracurricular activities on middle and high school campuses.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study sought to illuminate the experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursued and successfully completed a master's degree within the education field. As a result of the data collected, additional opportunities to explore the teacher-scholar experience would enhance the research base for teachers, adult learning, and higher education in relation to teacher-scholar experiences.

Specifically, a similarly designed study targeting un-certified teachers working towards their certification while teaching full-time would be beneficial to better understand student expectations and outcomes with alternative certification programs as well as add to the available research on adult learning in the field of education. Research in this area would provide valuable information for teacher educators, teachers, adults considering alternative certification programs, and professionals seeking a career change or move within the field. A closer look at middle and high school teacher-scholars would also provide increased research for adult learners and teacher

experience as these populations were not prevalent in the available literature. Alternatively, the same type of study could be conducted with a population of teachers who began advanced degree programs yet did not complete their educational endeavors. This study could also be closely replicated with doctoral candidates seeking a second, or additional, advanced degree or with a similar population of teachers who teach in standalone charter schools or private schools rather than public school systems.

In addition to research surrounding experiential learning, as a result of teacher-scholar program preference, a look into program design could yield informative results for program providers. Participant data from the current study cited specific reasons for choosing master's degree programs based on convenience to attend a brick and mortar university versus an online program. A quantitative survey of program selection and expectations would provide valuable data for university program coordinators as our society moves to a more transient, commuter population in a digital age. Also, a mixed-methods examination of the costs versus benefits of each program design may provide valuable information for not only universities developing new programming but also for students interested in exploring higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the experiences of eleven teachers in southeastern Louisiana who concurrently pursued their master's degrees while maintaining a full-time teaching career. Through in-person interviews and focus groups, data was collected, then transcribed and analyzed to determine recurrent themes and contrasting thoughts. Through data analysis, seven themes emerged: 1) Teacher-scholars' reasons for returning to higher education varied based on their personal and professional needs, 2) The teacher-scholar experience elicits a vast array of emotions, challenges, and successes, 3) Teacher-scholars were self-driven to start their programs

however intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provided encouragement for continued desire for success, 4) Teacher-scholars' support systems were integral to success in their master's programs, 5) Teacher-scholars were reflective about their teaching and learning and used reflection as a tool to improve their professional capabilities, 6) Teacher-scholars used concrete learning experiences to bring their learning into their classrooms and professional lives, and 7) Teacher-scholars' educational journeys provided opportunities for here-and-now learning as well as increased marketability for a future in the field of education.

Andragogical assumptions were compared to the participant data to determine how a generalized sense of adult learning fits with the data from teachers-scholars currently in the field. Experiential Learning theory was also examined and based on the findings from the study a revision to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015) was developed. This study gave voice to the participants and provided them with an opportunity to express the experiences, the struggles, and the successes that led to the completion of their degree programs and set themselves up for a prolonged career in education. The results from this study can be used to inform teacher education programs as well as teacher-scholars on the expectations, experiences, and perceptions of teachers who concurrently pursued higher education.

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## **Appendix A: Recruitment Email**

Dear [PARTICIPANT]:

I am writing to offer you an opportunity to participate in a research study about teachers who have concurrently pursued master's degrees in the field of education. I am a fellow teacher in southern Louisiana and am also a doctoral candidate at the University of New Orleans.

This study will examine the experiences of teachers who pursued continuing education while maintaining their full-time teaching roles. You are being contacted because you have been identified as a holder of a master's degree that was completed within the last few years.

I am seeking 10-15 teachers who will participate in one 90-minute individual interview and one 60-90-minute focus group with other teachers over the next six weeks. All information shared throughout the study will remain confidential and be used for the sole purposes of my doctoral dissertation research study. Interviews and focus groups will be scheduled outside of the school day and at a location convenient to you.

If you are interested in possibly participating, please reply to this email and complete and submit the attached questionnaire in order to determine whether you meet the necessary criteria for participation. Additionally, the data from the questionnaire will provide me with information I will need to plan and prepare for individual interview sessions for selected participants. By completing and submitting the informational questionnaire, you are consenting to be considered as a participant for this study.

I would greatly appreciate you taking some time to share your experiences with me for my study. Teachers' voices need to be heard and it is my hope that this study will provide the opportunity for teachers to share their experiences. Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Ashleigh L. Pelafigue, M.Ed.

## Appendix B: Initial Informative Questionnaire

*The purpose of this questionnaire is for you to provide some basic background information about yourself and your experiences with your own education and teaching. Please complete the following demographics questionnaire. If there is anything you do not wish to disclose, please leave that section unanswered.*

### Demographic Information

1. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

### Education

4. Undergraduate University: \_\_\_\_\_  
Degree Program (major/minor): \_\_\_\_\_  
Semester/Year Completed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Program Type: \_\_\_\_ in person (on campus) \_\_\_\_ online ONLY \_\_\_\_ hybrid
5. Graduate (M.Ed.) University: \_\_\_\_\_  
Degree Program (major/minor): \_\_\_\_\_  
Semester/Year Completed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Program Type: \_\_\_\_ in person (on campus) \_\_\_\_ online ONLY \_\_\_\_ hybrid

### Background Experience

6. During your master's degree program, what grade level(s) were you teaching?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. During your master's degree program, what was your usual academic student classification?  
\_\_\_\_ part-time (less than 6 credit hours) \_\_\_\_ full-time (6 or more credit hours)
8. How many hours, per day, *outside* of your course times and work day do you recall spending on work, projects or field experiences associated with your degree program?  
\_\_\_\_ 0-1 \_\_\_\_ 2-3 \_\_\_\_ 4 or more

9. During your master's degree program, what types of additional job-related responsibilities did you have? *Please note whether your participation was required or voluntary.*

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### **Current Experience**

10. Are you currently employed within the field of education?    ☐ yes    ☐ no

Please describe your current position. \_\_\_\_\_

11. How many hours outside of your contracted school day do you spend working on  
Tasks directly related to your daily teaching?    ☐ 0-1    ☐ 2-3    ☐ 4 or more

### **Logistical Preferences**

*This research study will involve in-person interview sessions as well as a focus group discussion related to your experiences as a concurrent teacher and student. Please answer the following questions relating to your preferences of communication for the duration of the study.*

12. For interview purposes, where would it be most convenient for us to meet:

☐ Metairie/Kenner    ☐ Westbank    ☐ Northshore    ☐ New Orleans

13. Interviews will be recorded with an audio device and then individually transcribed.  
For accuracy purposes, transcriptions will be reviewed prior to analysis of data to ensure correct interpretations of the transcription. Would you prefer to review the transcriptions in-person or via email?

☐ in-person    ☐ via email

14. A focus group will be conducted after personal interviews are concluded.

Format will be similar to the personal interviews and will involve other participants from the research study discussing their experiences. Would you be willing to participate in the focus group?

☐ yes    ☐ no



## Appendix C: Letter of Consent for Participants

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a graduate student, under the direction of Dr. Patricia Austin, in the College of Liberal Arts, Education and Human Development at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences teachers have while pursuing degrees in higher education.

I am requesting your participation, which would involve one 90-minute interview and a 60 –90-minute focus group to discuss your own experiences with concurrently teaching and pursuing your advanced degree. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

The risks of participating in the study are minimal: Participants may share information that they deem personal and sensitive however the study data will remain confidential and will be guarded with anonymity throughout the duration of the study. Benefits to participants include engagement opportunities for teachers to share experiences, to voice challenges, and to reflect on their own practices while working to share overall experiences to a larger population of teachers and scholars.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact me at (504) 913-8870 or Dr. Patricia Austin, at the University of New Orleans, (504) 280-6526.

Sincerely,

Ashleigh L. Pelafigue, M. Ed.

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study. This consent also applies to the audio recording of your interview and focus group sessions. You also understand that all discussions in interviews and focus groups are for the sole purpose of this research and must remain confidential.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at-risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-7386.

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Participant:

Location of Interview:

Time:

*Research Question: What are the personal and professional experiences of classroom teachers who have concurrently pursued a master's degree in education?*

**Introduction:** Hello. As you may recall from the email, my name is Ashleigh Pelafique. I am a doctoral student at the University of New Orleans. I am currently conducting a research study to highlight the experiences of classroom teachers who concurrently pursued a master's degree in education. I have spent the last 13 years of my life in both the elementary classroom and the college classroom so I can relate to the personal and professional challenges that teachers like us face. Unfortunately, though, populations like ours have not been researched, so that's where you come in! I'm conducting these interviews with ten (or more) teachers like yourself, in order to better understand what your experiences were like and how you moved forward after you completed your degree. During this interview, I will audio record our conversation so that I can transcribe it later. I may also jot down some notes while we talk as well. Is that okay?

**[[turn recorder on]]**

R: Good morning, \_\_\_\_\_, thank you for agreeing to talk with me. As we have discussed, I am a doctoral student from the University of New Orleans and I am conducting my dissertation research study. I am interested in hearing about your personal and professional experiences as a classroom teacher who concurrently pursued a master's degree in education.

1. Before we begin with discussing your experience, I'd like to talk about learners. My research study is based on adult learners and their experiences and I have found that researchers have different sets of criteria that they use to define adult learners. Can you tell me how you would define an "adult learner"?
2. Thinking about yourself as an adult learner – how would you define learning or your expectations from learning, in a general sense?
3. Can you describe to me your thought process behind going back to school to get your master's degree? What aspects of learning were you looking to fulfill? How did you know the time was right? What made you decide to do it while you were still teaching?
4. Think back to your time at (college name) while you were teaching (grade/s). Tell me about what life was like while you were teaching and taking classes at the same time?
5. Let's talk about some of your motivations during that time – how did you keep yourself on the path of success in order to finish your degree program? Did you ever feel a sense of burn-out or unmotivated?

6. How about your experiences in your own classroom? How did your graduate school experiences impact your life in the classroom? And at home?
7. [Relate to responses from question 6] What sort of role did reflection play in your daily teaching? Did you find that you were able to use the new knowledge you gained from your coursework in your classroom?
8. Describe how your concurrent teaching and attending classes impacted your personal life – positively and/or negatively. Did you ever have to pass on outings or experiences with your family and friends as a result of your studies? What was that like for you?
9. Let's talk about support. Thinking back to your experiences, what kind of support did you receive from others – family, friends, coworkers, university, etc.
10. Was their support influential to you? How?
11. So, you finally finish and you're graduating – describe how it felt to finally receive your degree.
12. Now that you're finished, what would you say that you gained from your experience with higher education?
13. Think about your life and career right now. Have you attained the personal goals and mastered any professional challenges that you expected to accomplish? What has this accomplishment done for you as a teacher?
14. What's next for you? Is there anything holding you back from being exactly where you want to be in your career and your life right now?
15. Just curious: If the opportunity presented itself, would you go back and do it all over again? Or maybe go for a higher degree?
16. Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experiences?

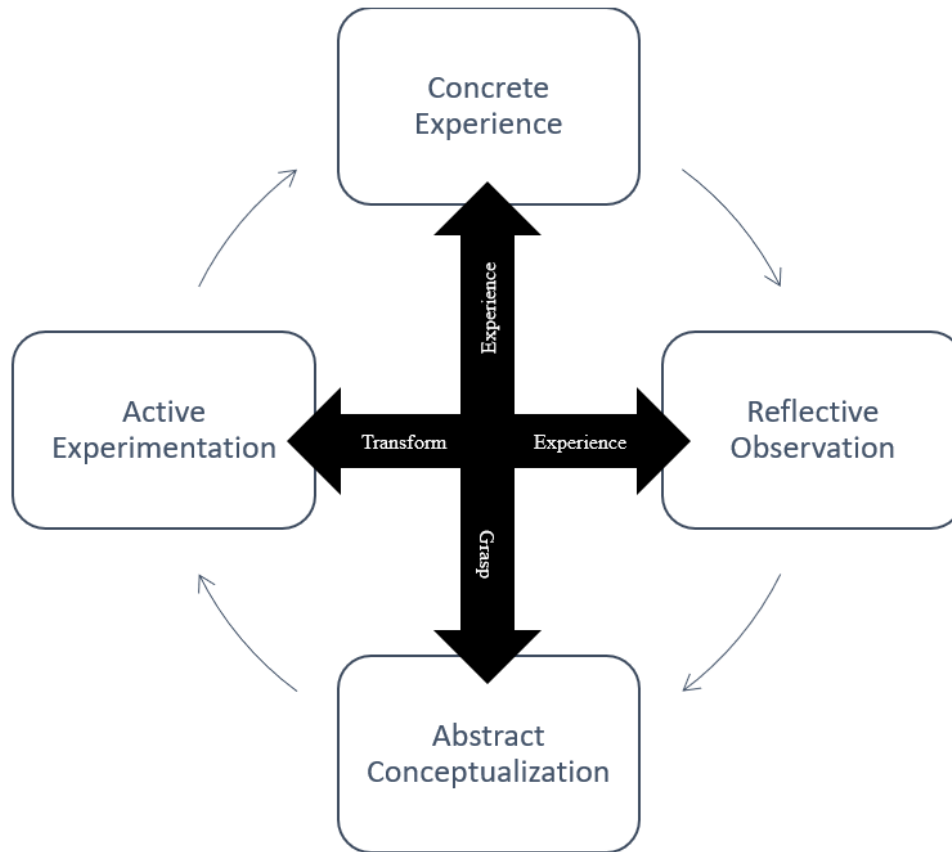
**[[turn recorder off]]**

R: I'll be in touch later in the week to have you review the transcription of our conversation today. It's important to my research that you review our discussion to ensure that I've captured your experiences in the way you intended. I truly appreciate your participation today and I'll send out the date and time for the focus group as soon as all of the interviews are completed.

**Provide information about Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle – briefly discuss in preparation for the focus group.**

## Appendix E: Participant Information about Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

### Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (updated 2015)<sup>6</sup>



Kolb suggests that there are four steps in the experiential learning cycle:

1. ***Concrete experience*** – involvement in new here-and-now experiences.
2. ***Observations and reflection*** – reflection on and observation of the learner's experiences from many perspectives.
3. ***Formation of abstract concepts and generalization*** – creation of concepts that integrate the learner's observations into logically sound theories.
4. ***Testing implications of new concepts in new situations*** – usage of theories to make decisions and solve problems.

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<sup>6</sup> KOLB, DAVID A., **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: EXPERIENCE AS THE SOURCE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**, 2<sup>nd</sup>, ©2015. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.

## **Appendix F: Discussion Notes for Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle**

David Kolb's model of learning is a cycle driven by action/reflection and experience/abstraction. He believes that "knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience. Grasping experience refers to the process of taking in information, and transforming experience is how individuals interpret and act on that information" (Kolb D. A., 2015, p. 51).

Grasping experiences traditionally takes place during some sort of concrete experience or through reflective observation. Learning from these opportunities typically arises as a result of creative tension from these four modes of learning. The process is described through the learning cycle where you, the learner, had the chance to "touch all the bases" by experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing your own understanding, then acting and experimenting based on what you learned.

## Appendix G: Focus Group Protocol

Participants:

Date:

Location:

**[[turn recorder on]]**

R: Thank you all for being here today! I appreciate you all taking the time to participate in my study. I hope that you enjoyed sharing your experiences with me during your interview sessions. Hopefully this afternoon will give you all a chance to talk even more about the experiences that made you the teacher you are today.

R: Our discussion today will surround David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. At the end of your interview sessions I provided each of you with a visual of the cycle and some background information. Please remember that this will not be a one-on-one conversation with *me*. My goal for this focus group is to have you all talking with each other about various experiences and making any connections you may find with one another.

R: Are there any questions before we begin?

*(pause again briefly, anticipating questions or need for clarification)*

R: With the learning cycle in mind, I would like you all to think back to your time spent in graduate school and in your classroom. Think about a time where you felt the proverbial light bulb go off. Perhaps you were in class listening to a lecture or maybe even in your own classroom and had the realization that something you learned recently had immediate value to you and your students' learning.

R: Our guiding question for this discussion will be – How do you feel that the learning cycle fits with your own experiences? Let's hear about the experiences you all have had -your own times of great growth, perhaps even struggle that led to that ah-ha moment.

*(at this time participants should begin to discuss their own experiences)*

Suggested prompts if necessary:

- a. Talk about the concrete experiences you remember being most impactful to you.
- b. What sort of role did reflection play in helping you develop your professional self as a result of your experiences?
- c. Let's discuss opportunities that may have left you confused or struggling to understand a situation. How did you overcome that confusion?

- d. The four stages in the learning cycle – talk about times where you may have felt as if you were starting at different parts of the cycle. Did you ever feel as if your learning came as a result of experimentation or conceptualization rather than a concrete experience?

R: Thank you all for sharing your experiences with us all. Your discussion is important to my research and will help me to better understand how experiential learning impacts teacher-scholars. In the coming days I will transcribe our discussions from today and begin breaking down the data. I will be contacting you all soon to look over the data and ask that you please help me to be sure that I have appropriately and accurately interpreted your feelings and experiences.

R: Thank you so, so much for your participation in my research study. This is the final piece of data for my dissertation and I will soon be drafting the final chapters. I will be sharing those with you all as well, as soon as they are ready.

## Appendix H: Usage Permission for Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2015)



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## **Vita**

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was educated in a public school system in southeastern Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelors of Science degree in early childhood education from the University of New Orleans in 2008. Shortly after beginning her teaching career, she entered the master's program at the University of New Orleans. She received her master's degree in curriculum and instruction with a focus in reading and literacy in 2012. She continued to teach in the public school system and again returned in 2013 to pursue her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction.